Charles Peters on Bush and Katri

Washington MONTHLY

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By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

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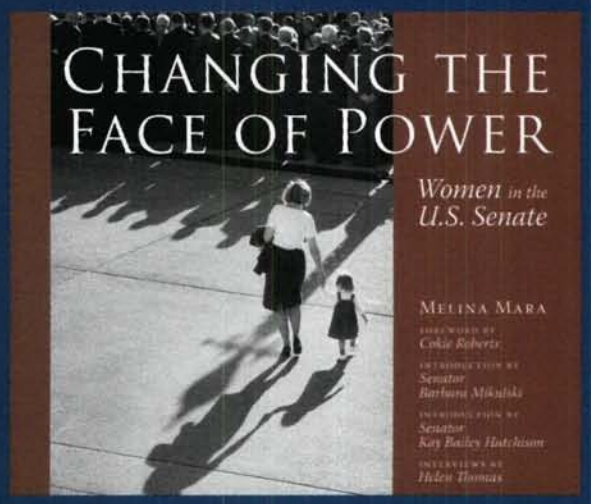

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Volume 37, No. 10 & 11
October/November 2005

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FEATURES

Tilting at Windmills 8
On Hurricane Katrina and President Bush.
by Charles Peters

Auto-Mobility 18
Subsidizing America's commute would reward work, boost the economy, and transform lives.
by Margy Waller

Test of Faith 23
Win or lose, Virginia gubernatorial candidate Tim Kaine is proving that Democrats can neutralize the religion issue with a sincere expression of faith.
by Mark Murray

Measure For Measure 26
The president's school reform law rests on the belief that its high-stakes tests are fair and accurate. But the Bush aide who designed the law has his doubts. And the Dallas schools have a better way.
by Thomas Toch

Getting Ahead in the GOP 32
Rep. Patrick McHenry and the art of defending the indefensible.
by Benjamin Wallace-Wells

Why Americans Can't Write Political Fiction 40
An essay.
by Christopher Lehmann

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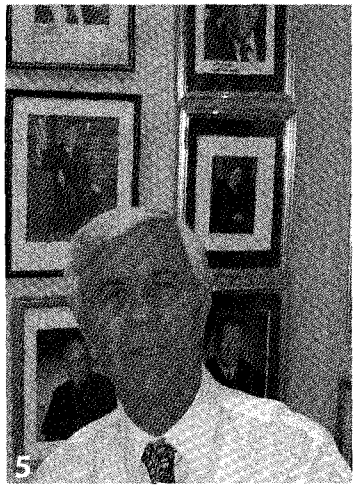

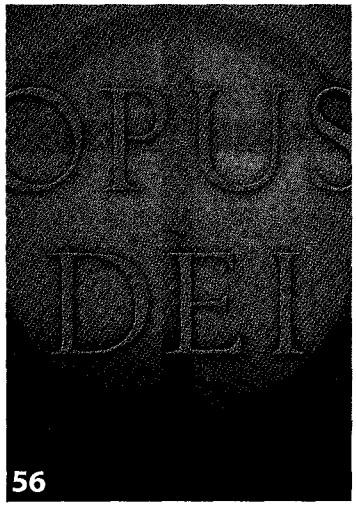

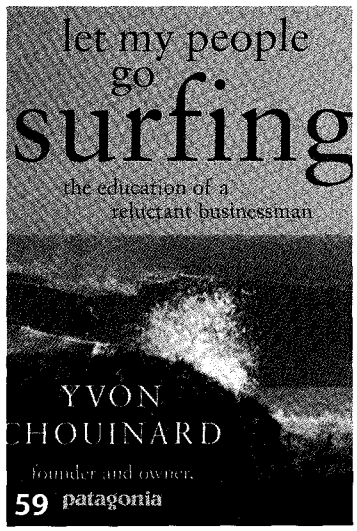

DEPARTMENTS

3 **Letters**

5 **10 Miles Square**

The Italian Job
Where Washington insiders get their hair cut

Plus: Jargon Watch: A Heck of a Compliment

ON POLITICAL BOOKS

48 **Early and Often**
How to avoid butterfly ballots, long lines, and pregnant chads.
by Phil Keisling

51 **No Right Turn**
If Americans haven't gotten more conservative, why is the GOP in charge?
by Christopher Hayes

54 **The Elephant in the Room**
Craig Crawford takes aim at the war against the media but misses the biggest target.
by Margaret Sullivan

56 **Let There Be Light**
A look inside the hidden world of Opus Dei.
by John Baumann

59 **Outdoor Market**
Can the eco-friendly approach that has made Patagonia big profits be a model for all other companies? Nope.
by Brendan I. Koerner

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Letters

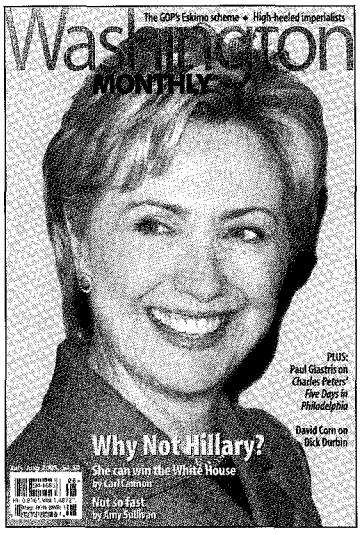
Alaskan Bruise

One omission from your article ("Polar Fleeced" by Benjamin Wallace-Wells, July/August) is the tremendous negative impact that the Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs) "legal loopholes" have had on legitimate small businesses around the nation. Federal agencies across the country have funded mega-contracts to ANCs by taking contracts intended for small firms and bundling them into large contracts to award to ANCs. As a result, hundreds of millions in small contracts have been taken away from legitimate small companies and handed to ANCs.

Jesus R. Gonzalez
President
Builtek Contractors, Inc.
Albuquerque, N.M.

I find it amazing that the editors of your publication would spend the money to send a writer all the way to Alaska on research and then allow publication of such a far-fetched, misleading article.

The Chugach people are a proud and resilient group. They have been through a great deal and continue to move ahead. I am honored to serve them, and every day that goes by, I feel a greater kinship with the shareholders of this corporation. You do them a huge disservice portraying them as country bumpkins. I would like to call the writer's statements about the villagers bigotry; however, pure ignorance is probably closer to the truth. Chief Gary Kompkoff is one of the most honorable men I have ever known. I take a great deal of pride in knowing he places his trust in me. Knowing him as I do, I can only imagine the pain he is feeling for his village and his people as a result of the writer's stupidity. Gary and the residents of the village of Tatitlik are gracious and welcoming. I



July/August 2005

suspect, however, this article will cause them to be less so in the future, and that truly is the real shame.

In response to Mr. Wallace-Wells's implications that it is the large defense contractors and white owners of ANC subsidiaries who are benefiting from the advantages the ANCs enjoy, I offer the following:

1) All of Chugach Alaska Corporation's (CAC) subsidiary companies are wholly-owned and controlled by Chugach shareholders. The Board of Directors of the parent company and of every subsidiary are CAC Native shareholders.

2) Many employees of the subsidiaries and the parent are native shareholders, including many in executive and middle management positions, project level managers, and many other widely varied positions. The contracting programs and so-called "loopholes" that are mentioned are not designed as "jobs" programs but rather, business development programs. We still strive, through educational and training benefits provided to shareholders, to offer employment opportunities. We also believe that we are making a positive impact on those whom we help educate and train who would rather be doctors or lawyers or engineers instead of employees of CAC.

3) The statement regarding our large business partners benefiting from sole-source contracts of ours is as ludicrous as saying *The Washington Monthly* is a strong supporter of the current administration in Washington! Lockheed Martin (LMCO) and Bechtel were named in the article as being recipients of these benefits. The only thing they benefit from is our experience, reputation for service and quality, and our history of extraordinary performance on our contracts. The $2.5 billion contract for services in the Marshall Islands that was highlighted is $2.5 billion over 15 years (potentially). The writer conveniently failed to mention that this contract was awarded under full and open competition (the competition being Northrop Grumman and Raytheon) and that Chugach is a subcontractor to LMCO and Bechtel! Not the other way around.

As the (white) President/CEO of CAC, I am paid a salary for my services to the corporation. The difference between me and my counterparts in public corporations is that I do not receive stock options or other perks typically associated with executive management of a large corporation. The stock is inalienable and cannot be traded, sold, bartered or given away except within the native community and even then there are restrictions.

There are no prime contracts in the Chugach portfolio where any large (or small) corporation has any sort of controlling interest or management authority over Chugach. We are proud of our accomplishments and believe we provide a valuable and cost-effective service to the government. This is proven time and time again in statements from our customers who have documented the savings and performance history provided by Chugach. It's a shame

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the writer didn't check or include any of these facts.

Barney Uhart
CEO, Chugach Alaska Corp.
Anchorage, Alaska

Benjamin Wallace-Wells responds: I am grateful for Mr. Uhart's reminders of some of the benefits provided by these organizations: the college scholarships they endow for members of their tribes, for instance, and the active role they have played in preserving Alaskan native history and culture—attributes which were detailed in my original article. I am grateful, too, for his reminder that Chugach, perhaps more so than most Alaskan Native Corporations, has begun to win some competitive contracts, and I hope that this category occupies a larger portion of its portfolio in the future.

But the point of my original article was not that the ANCs are completely meritless organizations, but that they are a deeply and problematically inefficient way for the federal government to achieve a policy goal. Giving exclusive benefits in federal contracting law to companies owned by Alaskan natives and hoping that some essential improvements will be made in the living situation of their shareholders is an awfully convoluted, costly, indirect, and just plain lousy way for the federal government to try to lift a fairly small population out of poverty—and it also has the effect of vastly benefiting a few groups which have nothing to do with Alaska: lobbyists and large corporations seeking contracts with the government that they wouldn't otherwise get.

As my article noted, Mr. Uhart's company and the other ANCs have been roundly criticized by groups as politically diverse as the Cato Institute and public employees unions for a simple reason: It seems unfair that prosperous firms such as these should enjoy advantages under federal law that other minority-owned businesses do not. If the ANCs would give up these special breaks, won only because of the clout of their state's congressional delegation, and resolve to be treated under federal law in the same manner as all other minority-owned businesses, I suspect that they would be widely applauded and that the articles critical of their position would stop.

Mr. Uhart raises an additional note of concern: that my article slandered the Alaskan native villagers by portraying them as country bumpkins. I'm sorry if the article gave that impression. The villagers aren't bumpkins, of course; they were smart and sophisticated enough to hire some extremely competent executives, including Mr. Uhart, who have led Chugach to great successes. The point of my visit to the native village described in the piece was to, more or less, assess what taxpayers were getting for their money, and to gauge to what extent all of these many advantages given to native firms for the ostensible purpose of improving life for natives really had made things better for them. I'm not alone in having found only mixed results. Last, two corrections: First, my original article referred to the residents of Tatitlik as "Eskimos"; while many of the natives there are eskimos, some are not, and I should not have used the single term to describe a diverse population. Second, my original article referred in passing to a joint contract Chugach Alaska had received with S&K Technologies to manage military bases in Iraq. No such contract exists; S&K and Chugach Alaska each have individual contracts to manage military bases in Iraq.

Publisher's Note:
Though we don't normally combine our October and November issues, we are doing so just this once for a good reason. We need to reboot our publishing calendar to conform to the weird but widely-followed rule that says monthly magazines should hit the newsstands a month before their advertised cover dates. To compensate our esteemed paid subscribers, we are extending your subscriptions by one month, free of charge.

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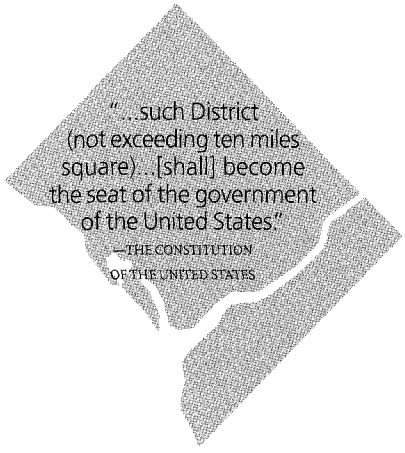
10 MILES SQUARE



The Italian Job

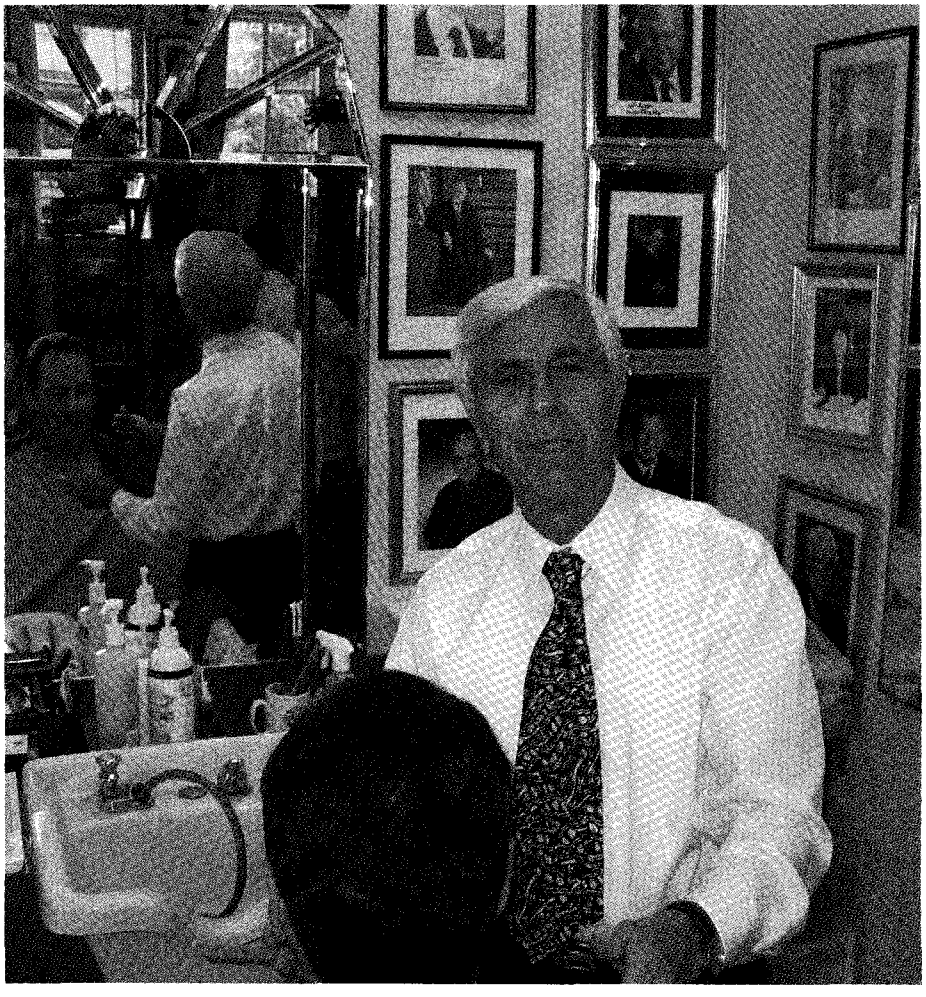
Where Washington insiders get their hair cut.

By Zachary Roth

Cutting William Rehnquist's hair can't have taken too long, at least in the last few years of his life. A couple snips around the back, straighten out the sides, hold up the hand mirror for judicial review, and you're pretty much done.

But that didn't prevent hairdresser and hairdressee from bonding. "Rehnquist is a very, very special friend," Diego D'Ambrosio recounted from his salon on 19th and Q streets in Dupont Circle, the day before the chief justice died, as his small staff buzzed purposefully around him. "When I cut Rehnquist's hair, we joke all the time. We play all the time.... I can talk with him freely, because he's just a very, very, very close friend. We talk anything."

Rehnquist is far from the only bold-faced Washington name who's been a regular at Diego's. In fact, he isn't even the only Republican Supreme Court chief justice from the



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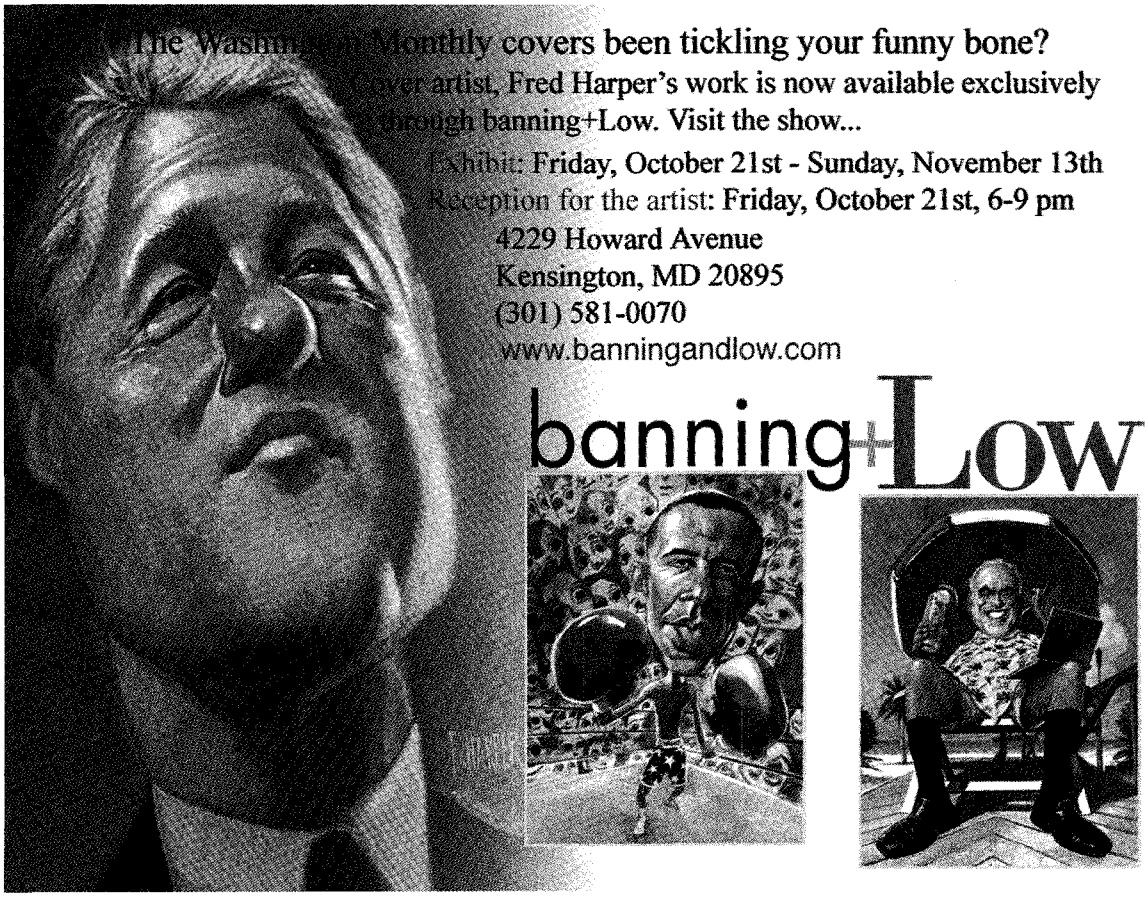
upper midwest. Diego points to a photo of a grinning, freshly coiffed Warren Burger, a customer for 30 years. Much like the man who succeeded him, Burger was "a very special friend. I love him. Well, I can't say 'love him.' He like-a me very much. I like-a him very, very much."

Diego seems to like everyone very, very much. His good humor and constant energy—greeting customers with a "*ciao, sta bene*?" singing along to the Verdi opera that plays all day, addressing his staff in Italian, Spanish, and English almost simultaneously (he says he also speaks French and Portuguese)—appear to have won him friends in some pretty high places. Signed photographs of the capital's movers and shakers adorn every inch of available wall space. Reagan, Bush 41 and 43, Clinton, Cheney, and Quayle all stare down at customers—though none has actually dropped in for a trim, many of their staffers have been regulars.

Diego grew up near Rome and trained as a hair stylist—"no put barber," he says—before coming to Washington in 1961 to work for a year at the Italian Embassy. Though he now considers himself American, his accent remains almost cartoonishly Italian. With his immaculate manners, coiffed silver hair, and perpetually elegant dress style—fine Italian shirts and ties, cufflinks, dress shoes—he could easily pass for one of the European diplomats who regularly stop by. Indeed, it's the salon's proximity to Embassy Row and the State Department that generates much of the high-ranking traffic. By Diego's count, his clientele comes from 135 countries and includes 75 foreign ambassadors and 17 presidents and prime ministers.

If you can judge a man's politics by the company he keeps, Diego is Lindsey Graham—a conservative who seems to get



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along with everyone. But, like Iowa caucus voters, he's used to thinking of politics as an essentially personal experience: He supported Quayle's short-lived run for the presidency in 2000 because of "the way he wrote the words to me in the picture." Diego perceived a side to the former vice president that many observers missed: "For me, he's a-very smart, very intelligent."

"[Former British prime minister] John Major, he was at my place. One time, he was at the State Department. The State Department called me. [Afterwards] he sent a beautiful letter." Major's shock of silver hair, which he wears combed across his forehead, bears a certain resemblance to Diego's own. "He said, 'just a-like my hair.' Very, very friendly."

Bibi Netanyahu, the former and perhaps future Israeli prime minister, is also a friend. "He gave-a to me two books, one about when he stormed the airplane in Africa [in fact, it was Netanyahu's brother, Jonathan who was killed in 1976 while leading an action against airplane hijackers in Uganda], and one about terrorism. Very, very, very pleased. Very great man."

It isn't all sunshine and light at Diego's, though. A regular customer reports that drop-ins are supposed to be assigned to the four or five stylists in a rotating order. But patrons often request one well-liked stylist by name, causing jealousy and backbiting among his less-favored colleagues. The stylist has threatened to quit in response to the rancor, but so far he's still there.

Lately, Diego has perceived a sense of anxiety among his customers as Iraq, Katrina, and rising gas prices have darkened the national mood. "[Before] everybody was happy. Now, you know, everybody is very, very—a little bit the opposite. . . . After September 11, everybody was with the president, myself included. Now, all of the problems we have here."

Nonetheless, he sees his salon as offering for his well-connected clientele not just a good haircut, but also a respite, however brief, from the stresses of running the world. "The people of the government like-a the way I conduct this place. They like-a the security of this place. I listen to opera every day. My place is opera . . . Americans, we look for security. That's the way we are.

"Okay my friend? You do-a the best, because I know I'm the best."

Zachary Roth is an editor of *The Washington Monthly.*

JARGON WATCH:

Michael Brown, the beleaguered recent head of FEMA, may have felt momentarily bucked up when President Bush spoke those now famous words: **"You're doing a heck of a job, Brownie."** But it turns out Bush throws that compliment around all over the place. In addition to half a dozen questioners at Social Security town halls around the country, here are a few others who have received this particular piece of Bush praise:

—Jim Towey, director of White House faith-based office, "He did a heck of a job being a lawyer," March 1, 2005

—Tommy Thompson, outgoing Secretary of HHS, "He's done a heck of a job," October 26, 2004

— Dick Cheney, Vice President, "Dick Cheney has done a heck of a job as the Vice President," September 13, 2004

—Cong. Jeff Miller (R-FL), "He's doing a heck of a job for the people of the panhandle," August 10, 2004

—Hamid Karzai, president of Afghanistan, "You're doing a heck of a job," June 9, 2004

—Sen. Bill Frist (R-TN), "He's doing a heck of a job," May 27, 2004

—Laura Bush, First Lady, "She's a wonderful wife, a great mother, and she's doing a heck of a job," January 5, 2004

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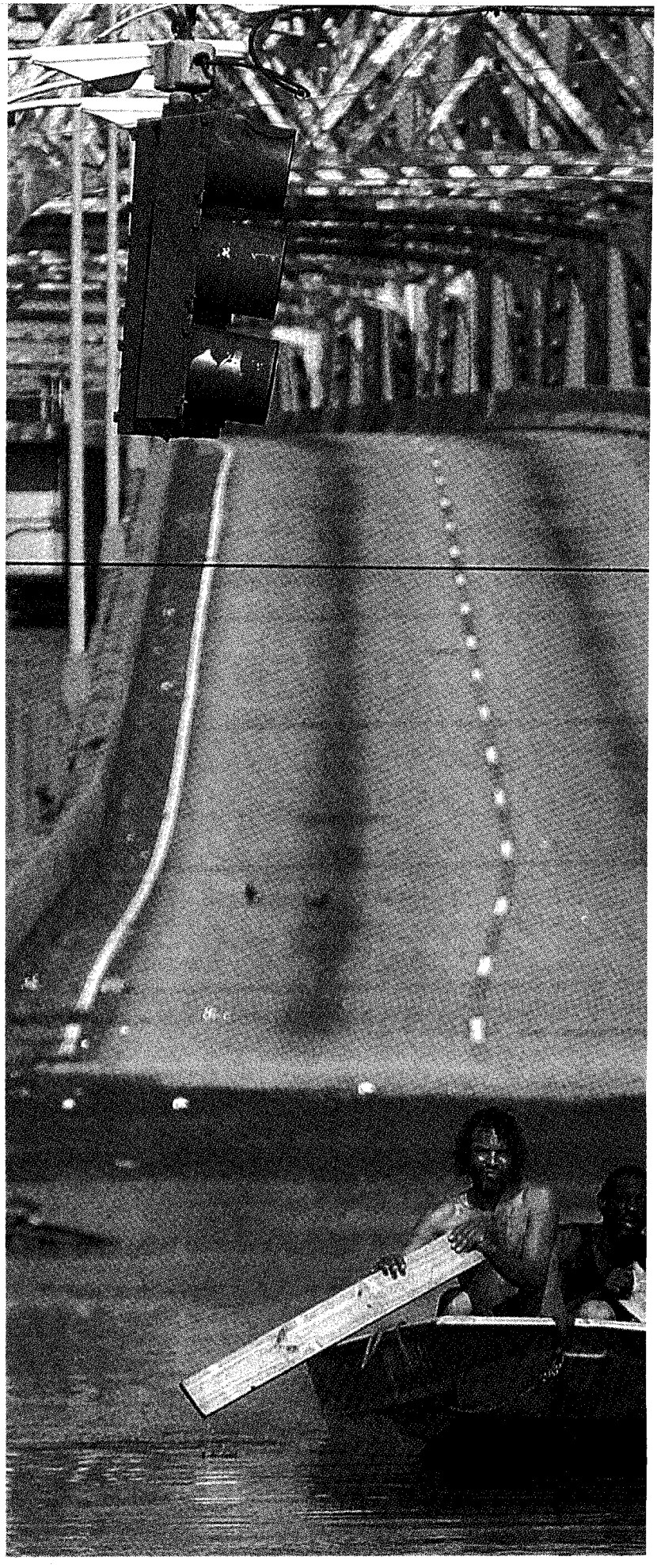
Tilting at **Windmills**

by **Charles Peters**

In the days after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, the country watched with a collective sense of growing horror as bodies floated by on our television screens and the government seemed adrift. Despite the reassuring statements at press briefings, no one seemed to be in charge on the ground, the chain of command in Washington seemed to go in a circle. Each day brought more rookie mistakes by an administration that is entering its sixth year of governing. Even more maddening, we learned that many of the problems that followed the hurricane strike had been—or else should have been—anticipated by officials in and outside of government. A lot of people have been trying to figure out why things went so terribly wrong. Here are some of their better guesses with a few thoughts of our own thrown in.

From its earliest days—actually, beginning in our first year—the *Monthly* has warned of the twin dangers of leaders who don't want to hear bad news and the subordinates who fear telling them about it. Both *Newsweek* and *Time*, in their issues of Sept. 19, do a superb job capturing the isolation of the White House that results. It wasn't until the morning of Aug. 30, a full day after Katrina had hit New Orleans and the first reports of flooding had reached the Emergency Operations Center in Baton Rouge, that Bush's aides met to decide "who gets to deliver the bad news" to the president—whose anger at the bearer of bad tidings they had good reason to fear—that he should cut short his vacation and return to Washington from San Diego.

Even after he got the news, writes *Newsweek*'s Evan Thomas, "Bush blithely proceeded with the rest of his schedule for the day, accepting a gift guitar and pre-



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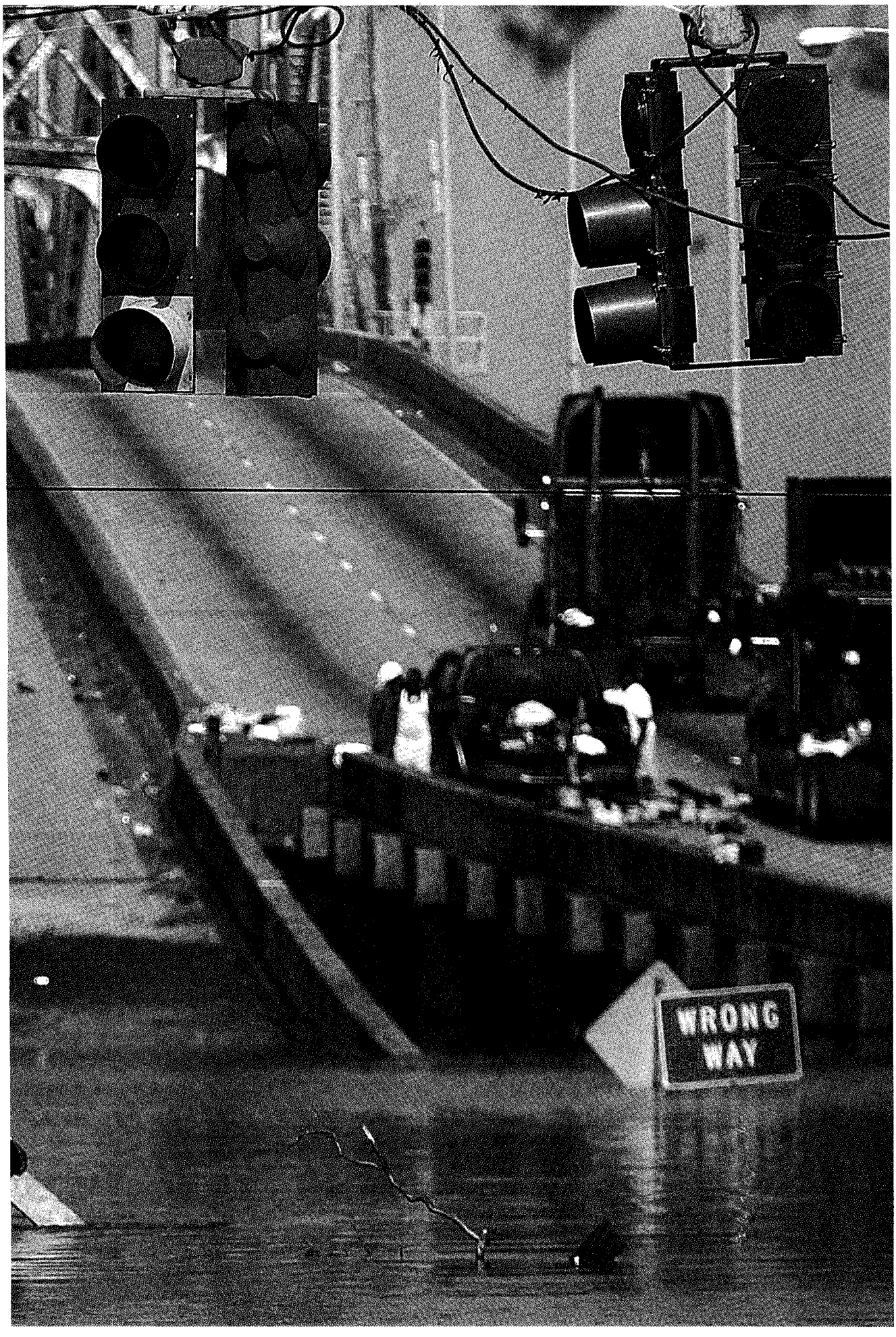

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tending to riff like Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*" while television was reporting chaos at the Superdome, along with widespread looting, and while the only federal presence was a handful of brave Coast Guard helicopter crews rescuing survivors from rooftops peeking above flooded streets.

But if he is ill-served by his handlers, it is how Bush would have it. "[Bush's] inner circle," *Time*'s Mike Allen explains, "takes pride in being able to tell him 'everything is under control'.... The result is a kind of echo chamber in which good news prevails over bad, even when there's a surfeit of evidence to the contrary." It's not just an echo chamber, but a parallel universe in which what the president believes to be true in no way resembles facts on the ground. "Four days after Katrina struck, Bush himself briefed his father and former President Clinton in a way that left too rosy an impression of the progress made," Allen writes.

One of the most disturbing things about the mistakes made with Katrina is that they echo the mistakes made with Iraq. A refusal to heed warnings stands out in each case. Just as it ignored Gen. Shinseki's prediction that many more troops would be needed than were being committed for the occupation of Iraq, the Bush administration also failed to act on warnings of the damage that was likely to result from Katrina, right up to a videoconference involving National Hurricane Center Director Max Mayfield and Bush on the day before the hurricane struck. How could Bush not have been alarmed if Mayfield told the president the same things he was saying in television interviews, where he warned of massive damage and flooding? After hearing the same warnings, the mayor of New Orleans said, "Max Mayfield has scared me to death."

The White House's tendency towards willful ignorance found itself replicated in other bureaucracies. On the Thursday after Katrina, with New Orleans in total disarray and with no evidence of any federal presence on the ground, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said, "It's a source of tremendous pride to work with people who have pulled off this really exceptional response." The next day, FEMA's deputy director Patrick Rhode boasted, "I am actually very impressed with the mobilization of man and machine to help our friends in this unfortunate area."

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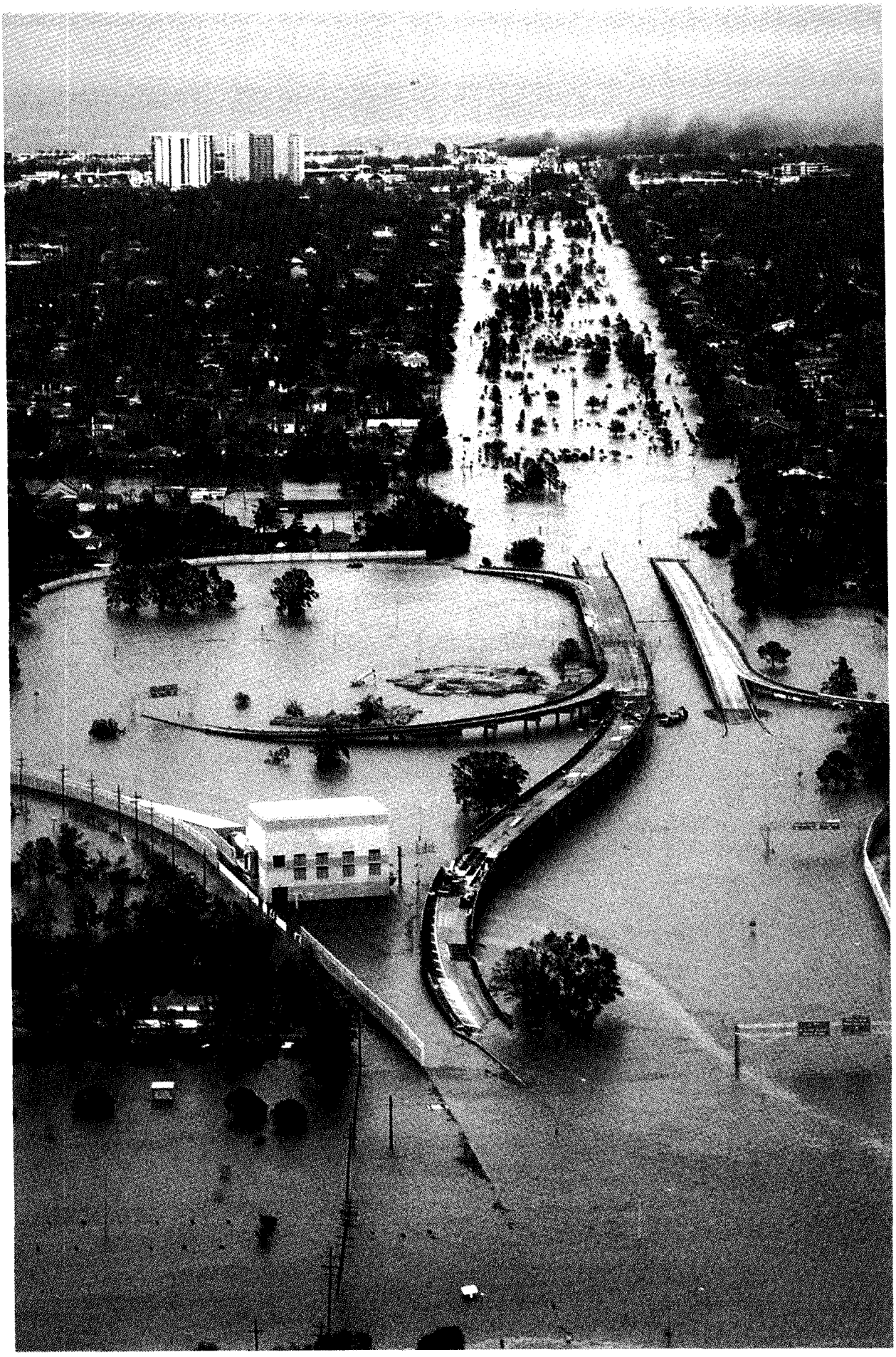

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One characteristic of the Republican mind played, I suspect, a considerable role in the administration's slow response. Watching television during the weekend before Katrina hit, they saw all those cars leaving New Orleans and probably figured that everyone was getting out, sublimely unaware that a large number of people simply don't have cars. As Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) put it, "[W]hoever was in charge appeared to assume that every American has the capacity to load up their family in an SUV, fill it with $100 worth of gasoline, stick some bottled water in the trunk, and use a credit card to check into a hotel on safe ground."

A similar blind spot revealed itself when, having abandoned the issuance of debit cards to survivors, the administration said it would make deposits in their bank accounts, apparently unaware that a large number of the survivors do not have bank accounts.

Having failed to take the poor into account during pre-disaster planning, the administration hasn't forgotten about the rich during post-disaster politicking. Deep in the DNA of wealthy Republicans, there is an aversion to doing their part, not only avoiding service in the military, but also trying to avoid every tax they can. Now, it's capped off by Bush's proposal for a massive program of Katrina recovery without any increase in taxes. *The Wall Street Journal* reports that Republicans in Congress even want to cut taxes by inserting into any Katrina recovery program a localized suspension of the estate tax—which, by the way, now only applies to people with estates worth over $1.5 million.

What is so maddening about the estate tax exemption is, as the *Journal* noted in another article, many of New Orleans' wealthiest escaped from Katrina with their homes on higher ground largely unscathed, with their private generators supplying the electricity so conspicuously absent in the rest of the city and continuing the gracious living to which they have been accustomed. "Mr. O'Dwyer at His Mansion Enjoys Highball With Ice," reads the subhead of the *Journal* article.

One of the frustrations many Americans felt as they viewed day after day of suffering without any

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rescue was this: Where was the cavalry? Where were the troops? Well, as *Newsweek* reports, Donald Rumsfeld opposed sending regular army troops to New Orleans. It's not hard to guess that one reason was that the Iraq war had already stretched the Army too thin. It's hard to see how anyone can deny that Iraq has left us without enough troops to deal with other present and potential needs. When the massive activation of reserve troops began prior to the war, many people voiced concern that these reserves—a great number of whom, in their civilian capacities, are cops, fire fighters, and other first-responders—would leave a vacuum that could not be filled if something major happened here at home. Tragically, it appears they were correct.

Just as we were hamstrung by the lack of troops on the ground in Iraq, we were also handicapped by the shortage of talent in the office of L. Paul Bremer. Articles in both this magazine and *The New York Review of Books* have shown that Bush loyalists and conservative ideologues were placed in jobs that should have been filled by people with knowledge of Iraq and expertise in their respective fields. This is how the actual Bremer staff was described: "They are all on the campaign trail. . . . Everything is seen in the context of the next election. . . .They see this as a stepping stone to a better job in the next Bush administration. . . .They know nothing about development. . . .They come up with hare-brained schemes that cause so many problems that they take more time to fix than to create."

Similarly, the top levels of FEMA were staffed not by people with experience in disaster response, but by advance men and spin doctors. The deputy director and deputy chief of staff both came from the White House Office of National Advance Operations where, in the words of a *New York Times* editorial, they were the people who decide "where the President will stand on the stage and which loyal supporters will be permitted into the audience." Scott Morris, who was third in command of FEMA until May, had been a press handler on the Bush presidential campaign.

The result of all of this background in public relations was evident as FEMA briefed firefighters from other

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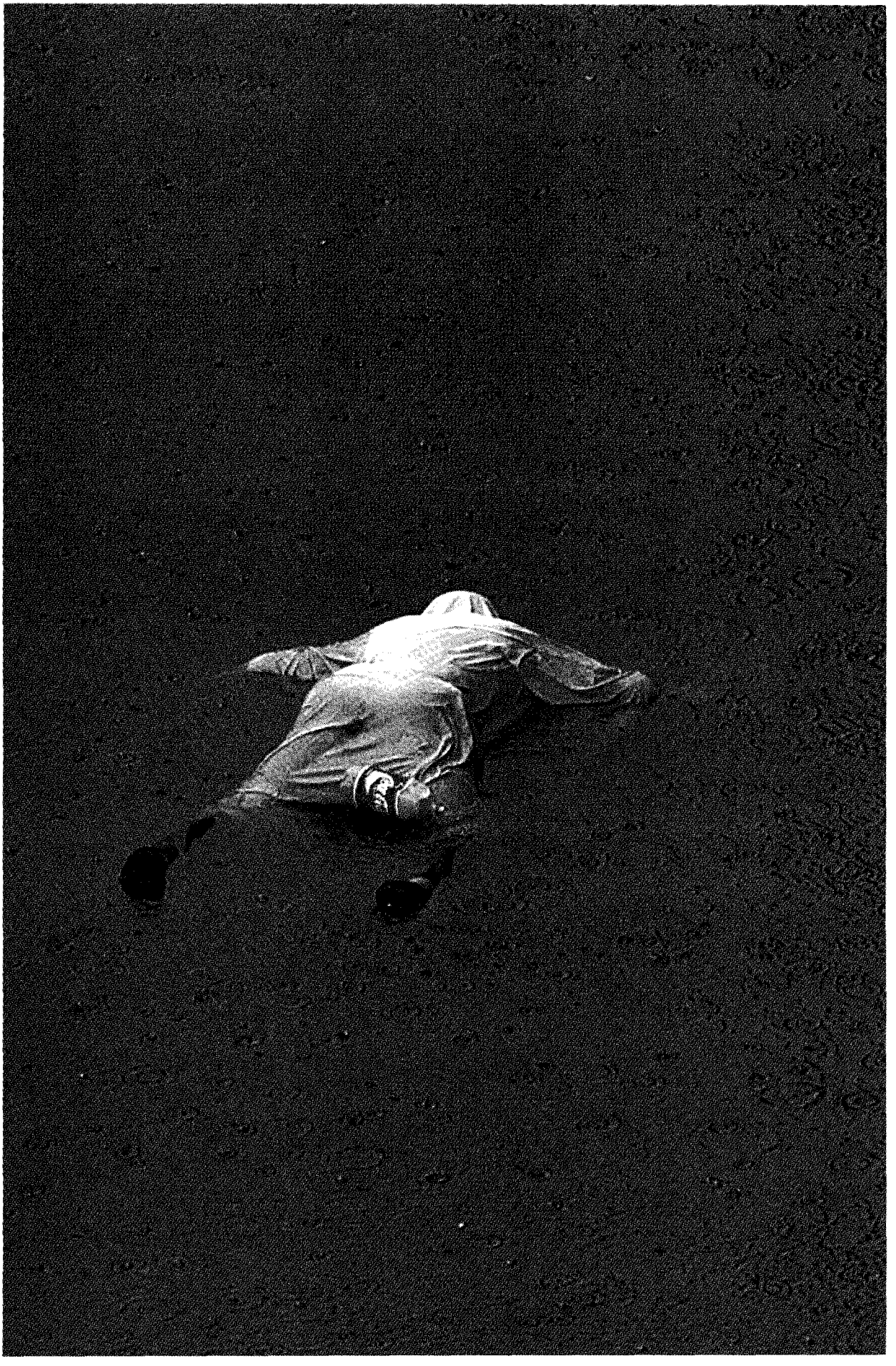

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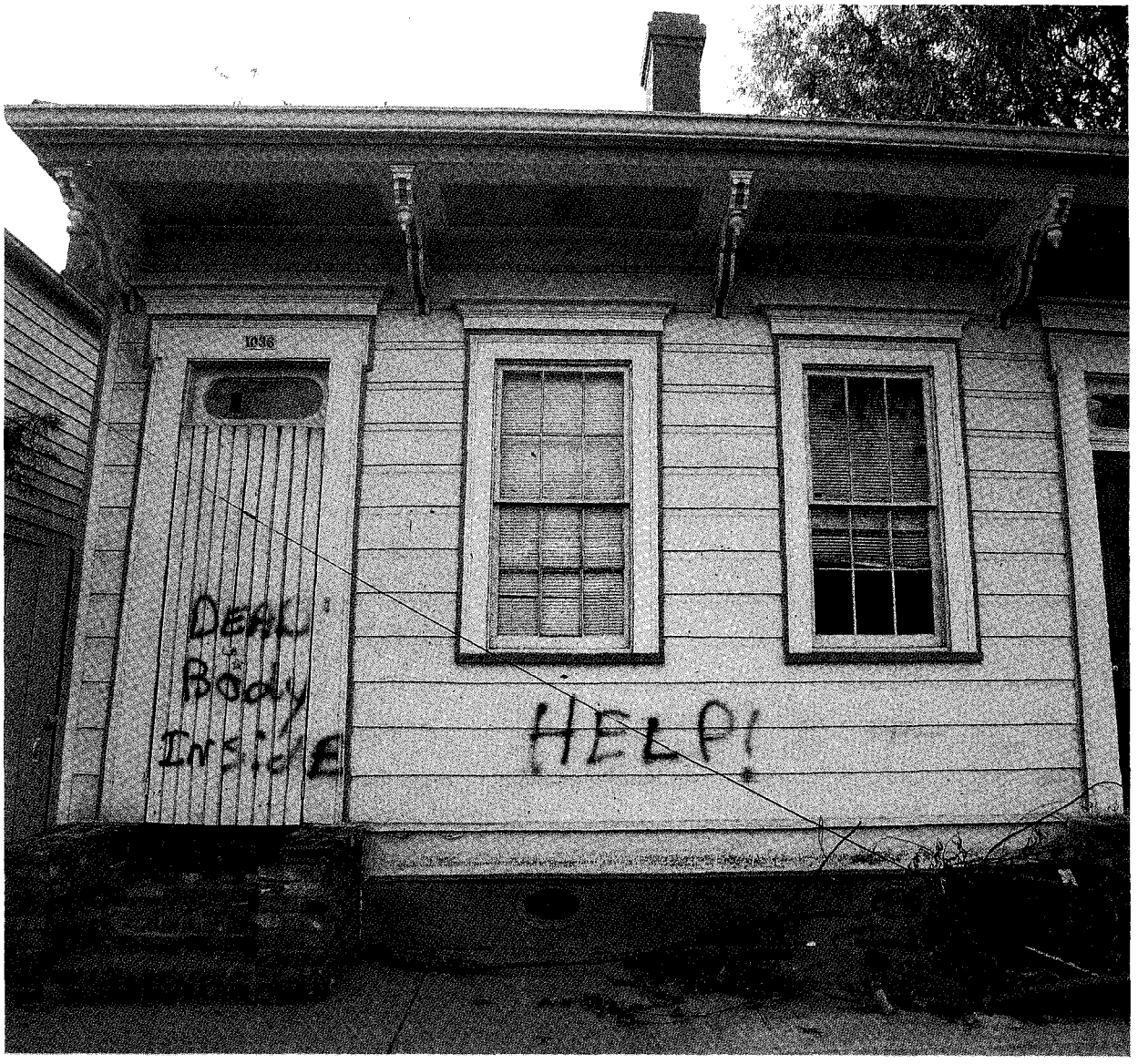
cities who had volunteered to help out in New Orleans. As they watched television sets showing fires raging there, the FEMA representative told them, "Your job is going to be community relations. You'll be passing out FEMA pamphlets and our phone number." It could be that the administration was concerned only about protecting its image. But it's also possible that these poor souls simply didn't know what else to do and fell back on the only thing they knew.

How do incompetents end up in these often critical government positions? One trait of bureaucratic culture unique to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. is the tendency to think of the White House as the only part of the government that is truly important. Mike Allen in *Time* quotes a lobbyist close to the Bush administration who says: "Katrina has shown the incredible weakness of the notion that you can have weak players in key spots because the only people who matter are in the White House. You can't have a Mike Brown at FEMA unless you can guarantee that there isn't going to be a catastrophe."

One clue to the collapse of FEMA might have existed in a report released in 2003 by the Partnership for Public Service. They studied the morale of federal employees at each government agency—FEMA ranked dead last.

Although the excellent media coverage of the storm and the failed response has been one of the few hopeful developments in Katrina's wake, the press does not escape blame either. Why didn't anyone in the media want to know what was wrong over at FEMA before Katrina? We have done an extensive Nexis search and can only find one article that took a serious look at the agency since Bush came to the White House in 2001. That one was excellent, foreseeing many of the problems that have now become apparent to us all. The story, by Jon Elliston, appeared in North Carolina's *Independent Weekly*, a publication that unfortunately does not enjoy wide readership. Still, one would have thought that at least one enterprising editor or reporter from the major media would have seized on the leads provided by the *Weekly* when it ran one year ago.

Even better would have been for



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news outlets to recognize that this is their job—figuring out if government agencies are doing their jobs and raising holy hell when they don't. For all of the endless "Fleecing of America"-type reports on the evening news, what we need more than their exposés of minor fiscal scandal is an examination of whether government agencies are performing their missions. Are they doing what they are supposed to do? If not, how can they be fixed? That is the kind of news that concerns millions and millions of us.

Over the years the *Monthly* has tried to ask the tough questions, to examine—and to goad the rest of the media into examining—the performance of government agencies. Ten years ago, we published a story by Danny Franklin describing how James Lee Witt had raised FEMA out of the disaster of Hurricane Andrew and transformed it into an effective agency. So we should have been among the first to ask ourselves how things could have changed so markedly for the worse. But to our embarrassment, we were not.

I have lived through a good many administrations now, and in my memory there have been only two presidents who have been willing to make a major effort to find out what's going on in the government outside the White House. The two were Franklin Roosevelt, and John Kennedy, who learned from the Bay of Pigs how to avoid disaster during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Unlike Kennedy, Bush has not seemed able to learn from the lessons of experience. Here is *The Washington Post*'s account of a recent report by members of the 9/11 Commission: "Four years after the September 11, 2001 attack, the federal government has failed to enact crucial homeland security reforms that could have saved lives and improved the sluggish response to Hurricane Katrina.... Local emergency officials are still unable to reliably communicate with one another [and] the federal government has no clear system of command and control for responding to a crisis." Even the administration's favorite newspaper, *The Washington Times*, concedes that four years after 9/11, the CIA has still failed to penetrate al Qaeda, not to mention North Korea and Iran.

I should concede that Bush's response to Hurricane Rita indicates that he just may be taking at least a flier at learning from his experience. This time, he wasn't caught imitating Tom Cruise, and the government's response did seem sharper. But, even though improved, the response still left far too much to be desired. So we join in the call for an investigation of the government's handling of Katrina and Rita that is truly as independent as the 9/11 Commission. Beyond that, it's going to be up to the media to press those in power to apply the lessons of 9/11, Iraq, Katrina, and Rita, not only to hurricane response, but to the way the rest of the govern-

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ment is run. Republicans control not only the White House, but the Congress and the courts that might otherwise call it to account. It is precisely at such a time as this, when the most powerful seem the least given to self-criticism, that the media has the highest duty to hold the president's feet to the fire.

Some conservatives—most notably Bill O'Reilly on the FOX News Channel—have held up the government's botched preparation for and response to the hurricane as proof that government doesn't work. But that's just not the case. FEMA performed well under Witt's leadership, reacting with speed and efficiency to a whole array of disasters in the mid-1990s, including massive Midwest flooding and a series of devastating hurricanes. The Katrina response was not a failure of government; it was a failure of bad government.

At the root of the White House's cynicism about filling jobs at agencies like FEMA is the anti-government attitude that pervades the Republican Party. If you think the federal government is unnecessary, a tax-eating burden on the backs of American citizens, then you don't care very much about the quality of the people you appoint. As a top official of the Civil Service under Ronald Reagan once observed: "Government's goal should not be employee excellence, but employee sufficiency."

If the appointee shares the same attitude, he will be like Joe Allbaugh, the former Bush campaign manager whose devotion to FEMA and its mission could be measured by the swiftness of his departure from the agency. He left after only two years as a director to cash in as a lobbyist, selling his services to, among other clients—and you won't be surprised at this one—the KBR division of Halliburton.

Shortly after Allbaugh took office, he expressed the Federalist philosophy shared by almost all of his fellow Republicans when he said: "We must restore the predominant role of state and local response to most disasters." The problem here is that most cities and states don't have the resources to deal with a major disaster. The need for federal help is often going to be immediate. That is why the three day span that FEMA officials had determined they could rely on local and state response turned out to be a nightmare.

At the end of the day, this disaster exposed the limits of conservatism. If you do not believe in government, you are more prone to its inherent pitfalls. You don't guard against them with competent appointees. You assume that mistakes are the unavoidable result of bureaucracy, not your inability to manage and when necessary reform that bureaucracy. You assume that everyone would be better off without government—even the poor, the sick, the elderly.

For today, however, those of us who have critiqued conservatism for years take no satisfaction in being right. We can only mourn the loss of life and livelihood with our fellow citizens. ◆

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Auto-Mobility

Subsidizing America's commute would reward work, boost the economy, and transform lives.

By Margy Waller

Art by Jerry Nelson

Among the many unpleasant realities exposed by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath—from persistent income and racial disparities to the chronic incompetence of the Bush administration—one of the most surprising, to many, was this: our nearly total dependence on automobiles. Nowhere was this clearer than in the exodus from New Orleans itself. The difference between those who escaped with their lives and loved ones, and those who did not, often came down to access to a car and enough money for gas. Now, in the recovery stage, many of those who were left behind have been evacuated to trailer-park camps, where they are likely to be worse off than they were before, in part because they cannot get to where the jobs are.

Margy Waller served as a domestic adviser in the Clinton-Gore White House and writes about transportation and poverty. She is based in Washington, DC.

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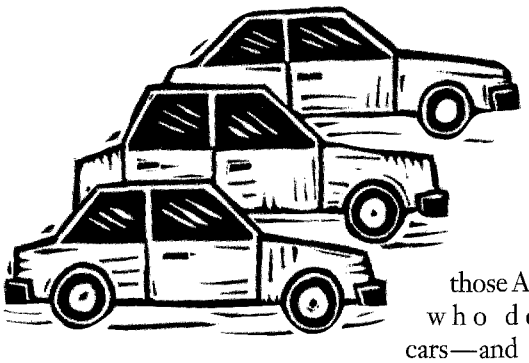

Even those Americans who do have cars—and who live nowhere near the Gulf Coast—have been affected by Katrina. After the hurricane, already-high gas prices spiked to record levels—suddenly, it cost $60 to fill up the tank. Prices receded somewhat afterwards. Given worldwide supply and demand issues, prices are more likely to move up than down in the near future, as most Americans understand. No wonder, then, that gas prices top the list of financial concerns in recent polling. These higher prices might be more tolerable if incomes were rising. But in fact, incomes have been flat since 2001 and declined last year for working-age households.

American drivers have taken a number of steps in response to high gas prices. SUV sales, which had already started to slip, plunged further in Katrina's wake while demand for fuel-efficient vehicles like the Toyota Prius soared. But while we can choose to buy hybrids or cut down on trips to the grocery store, the hard truth is that, in a suburbanized country, there is only so much Americans can do to reduce their car usage. To make a living, they have to work. And to get to work, the vast majority of Americans have to drive.

There is a limit to what government can do to reduce gas prices or increase private sector wages, at least in the short term. But it can do something to give middle-class families some relief and low-income workers a leg up—by recognizing that the cost of commuting is a business expense, and changing tax policy to reflect that fact. The federal government should offer tax credits that would lower the cost of commuting to work for low and middle-income employees, and would allow low-income workers who can't afford a reliable car to get one.

Employers, welfare administrators, and the unemployed have long asserted that transportation barriers are a key obstacle to success on the job, so these commuting credits may be the most promising next step for welfare reform. They would help transform the lives of many low-income Americans, giving them a previously unimaginable level of convenience, security, and freedom. And, in a broader sense, after five years of easing the tax burden on those who don't need to work for a living, commuting credits would—for the first time in a long time—give a break to those who do.

Keys to Success

A century ago, getting to work seldom required a lengthy commute. In rural areas, farmers walked out the kitchen door to their jobs. And most urban residents either lived within walking distance of their places of employment or could rely on convenient public transit systems like streetcars. Today, however, two-thirds of residents in metropolitan areas live in the suburbs, and two-thirds of new jobs are located there as well. It's therefore no surprise that 88 percent of workers drive to their jobs.

Left behind in this car culture are central-city poor residents without cars, who have become increasingly isolated from the American economy. As Mark Alan Hughes, William Julius Wilson, and other scholars have documented, the steady movement of jobs out of cities and into the suburbs has helped create and sustain the concentrated poverty that is now endemic to America's urban areas. Because new jobs tend to be located in ever-expanding suburbs, which are poorly served by mass transit, poor central-city residents find themselves living further and further away from economic opportunities. Evelyn Blumenberg, a professor of urban planning at UCLA, found that car-driving residents of the Watts section of Los Angeles have access to an astounding 59 times as many jobs as their neighbors dependent on public transit. Even more isolated are the car-less low-income families that now live in the suburbs—nearly half of all metropolitan poor.

There is reason to believe that not having a car isn't just a consequence of poverty—it's a barrier to escaping it. A significant body of research shows that low-income people with cars work at higher rates, and earn more, than those without. Outside factors like personal motivation—the type of people who get cars are likely to be the type who also get jobs—could go some way to accounting for the difference. But researchers who have evaluated that possibility by looking at existing survey data and at a small program that provides cars to the working poor find that car ownership does indeed directly help people to work, and to earn, more.

The lack of a car limits opportunities for America's poor in other ways too. It's never easy to be a working single parent, but it's infinitely harder without a car. When you spend three hours a day commuting to work by bus and train, then have to buy groceries and pick up your kids, there isn't much time for anything else—like helping with homework or after-school activities, taking yourself or your family to the doctor when necessary, or even finding a partner to help share the load. And lack of access to a car limits your housing options, making it even harder to move into safer neighborhoods, or ones with better schools.

Perhaps worst of all, the lack of a car leaves people more vulnerable to unforeseen emergencies. Katrina was an extreme example, but the daily lives of the poor are filled with smaller ones. In *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare*, Jason DeParle follows Angie Jobe, an inner-city Milwaukee single mother. At one point, Jobe has her food stamps cut off because of a bureaucratic error. Not having a car, she takes the bus to the food stamp office to

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For fully functioning citizens in this country today, a car is almost a necessity, and any American who needs one to work ought to be able to afford one.

clear up the problem, but it breaks down on the way there, and she arrives late, so no one will see her. She's forced to return the following day and eventually has her stamps reinstated, but the episode ends up costing her $500—more than a week's wages.

Clearly, the problems are most acute for low-income families without cars. But even for low- and middle-income workers who do own cars, purchase and operating costs take a significant bite out of their income—more than 20 percent of all household expenditures go for transportation, second only to housing. For the vast majority of households, those costs aren't optional—cars represent a fixed and non-negotiable expense. And every time the price of gas increases, it is in effect a tax on work.

Right of way

Federal policy has long given favorable treatment to work expenses, and rightly so. The government subsidizes the cost of college and worker retraining. The tax code allows deductions for the cost of uniforms, job searches, tools, home offices, and work-related moving. There are even tax breaks for non-commuting work travel and parking. Yet one of the largest and least avoidable work-related expenses for most Americans—the cost of getting to and from work, receives no favorable treatment in the United States, though it does in countries like Germany and France.

This inequity can be remedied in a simple and straightforward way. The federal government should offer a tax benefit to anyone who commutes to work and is in the middle to bottom of the income scale—that is, anyone in the 60 percent of U.S. households making less than $52,000 a year. Those who need the credit most would get the most help: Lower-income workers would receive a refund if their credit exceeded the amount of taxes they owe, in the form of a check for up to $3,000. That's enough to help significantly with the purchase and maintenance of a decent, though not fancy, car. Those higher up the income scale would get a dollar-for-dollar credit against taxes owed; a family making $40,000 would get back around $1,000. To avoid punishing those who don't use cars, all workers with commuting expenses—even those who take mass transit—could claim the benefit.

Many would still be unable to purchase a car because of credit problems or the inability to provide a down payment. Fortunately, nonprofit organizations like Working Wheels in Seattle and Vehicles for Change in the Washington, D.C., area already help to provide loans and decent cars for poor workers. These successful programs could be expanded using federal resources to cover all working families who need assistance. And this move would help in other ways. Insurers and car dealers often make the poor pay excessive rates, which acts as a further obstacle to car ownership. Widening the reach of nonprofit programs would reduce the impact of these bad business practices. In addition, these programs aid working families to improve their credit rating, and develop traditional banking relationships—two more crucial steps in rising up the income ladder.

Road Worriers

This is an ambitious proposal, and a costly one. If all eligible workers took advantage of the option—an unlikely prospect, based on our experience with other credit programs—the cost could reach $100 billion a year. Any initiative that big raises certain obvious objections.

Many who would be willing to spend that amount of money would prefer that it go to mass transit, in the hopes of reducing congestion and pollution. But there is little reason to think that even a massive investment in public transportation would substantially reduce the overall amount of driving Americans do. Anthony Downs, a transportation expert at the Brookings Institution, has projected that doubling the number of people who take mass transit to work (a Herculean achievement) would reduce the number who drive by only around 5 percent. While it unquestionably makes sense to improve service to the transit-dependent, particularly in dense urban neighborhoods, no amount of money will enable us to use transit to meet the needs of most workers. Only cars can do that. And even if every car-deprived household in the bottom half of the income scale were to buy an automobile, it would increase the number of vehicles on the road by only around 3.5 percent. The modest effects of this slight increase are far outweighed by the moral imperative to give the poor access to a crucial commodity enjoyed by the rest of society.

Another objection is that the plan would lessen incentives to cut down on driving and thus reduce our oil consumption. No doubt it will to a small extent. But because the credit isn't directly tied to the price of gas, Americans would continue to feel the sting when prices at the pump are high. They would therefore still have a major incentive to change their behavior—by cutting down on inessential trips, by buying more fuel-efficient vehicles, and by supporting politicians who favor raising fuel economy standards.

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There is reason to believe that not having a car isn't just a consequence of poverty—it's a barrier to escaping it.

Perhaps the strongest objection is that the nation can't afford a $100 billion program each year during a time of massive deficits and huge unpaid costs, both overseas and on the Gulf Coast. But let's take a step back. The deficits exist in the first place thanks in large part to a particular vision of tax policy espoused by conservatives in Congress and the administration, one which presumes that easing the tax burden on the wealthy will make the economy grow. Over the last five years, taxes have been cut by over $2 trillion, almost 70 percent of which has gone to the richest 20 percent of Americans. Even so, the economy has remained unsteady, and the number of Americans in poverty has increased.

There is another way to think about tax policy. Former senator John Edwards, among others, argues that the country would be better off, and the economy stronger, if we rewarded work instead of wealth. This was the approach of the 1990s, when taxes on the rich increased, the Earned Income Tax Credit doubled, and the minimum wage rose. These changes coincided with the longest economic boom in American history; incomes rose while poverty and unemployment declined. Replacing the Bush tax cuts with the commuting credit would result in a net savings of around $1 trillion over 10 years, and would realign tax policy to reward the American value of hard work.

Would such an idea ever be politically feasible? In fact, there is reason to believe that it could attract broad support, and help forge some unlikely alliances. Unreliable cars and unpredictable transit are a major contributors to employee tardiness and absenteeism, cutting productivity and profits. Commuting credits would ease that problem, and increase the pool of applicants for low wage jobs, making the credits a natural sell to major employers. And the automakers and the powerful auto unions would surely welcome the prospect of creating a new market for cars.

The political logic may be the most compelling for candidates: Any proposal that involves money in the pocket for this many voters won't lack for public support. In particular, rural and exurban workers who have long been particularly hard hit by this tax on work are a natural constituency for the commuting credit. Indeed, in addition to transforming the lives of America's inner-city poor, commuting credits could also be the first step toward making low- and middle-income voters feel that the federal government is making a difference in their economic well-being.

The idea that driving a car is a lifestyle decision has long since become outmoded. Americans do love to drive, but these days, they also must drive. To be a fully functioning citizen in this country today, a car is a virtual necessity, and any American willing to work ought to be able to afford one. We use the tax code to subsidize most other work expenses. It's time we did the same for the most common and unavoidable of them all. ◆

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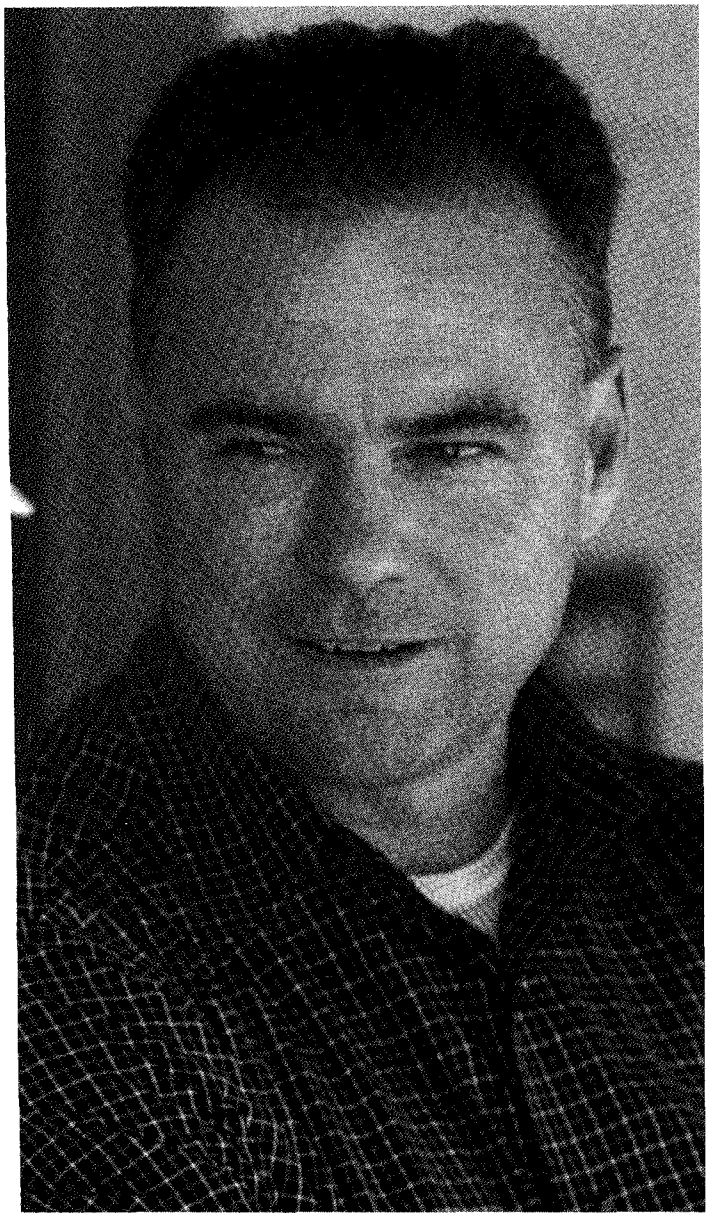

Test of Faith

Win or lose, Virginia gubernatorial candidate Tim Kaine is proving that Democrats can neutralize the religion issue with a sincere expression of faith.

By Mark Murray

Mark Murray is an off-air political reporter for NBC News.

When people say that Democrats have a "religion" problem, they're thinking of the time when Howard Dean told reporters that his favorite book in the New Testament was Job. Or *The Washington Post* interview in which Al Gore summoned his evangelical verve and told Sally Quinn that he tries to make decisions by asking himself, "What would Jesus do?" Or, more recently, C-SPAN footage of Democratic politicians cramming Bible verses into their speeches seemingly at random in an attempt to win back values voters. The overall effect seems stilted and—worst of all—insincere.

It's no wonder, then, that despite concerted efforts by Democrats since last year's election—developing religious outreach, hiring faith advisors, and training candidates on how to "talk the talk"—Americans still aren't buying it. Only 29 percent of voters think the Democratic Party is religion friendly, according to an August 2005 poll by the Pew Research Center. It hasn't helped that religious conservatives have used events like Justice Sunday to charge that there is a war "against people of faith," and that a handful of conservative bishops have openly questioned whether Democratic Catholics are "real" Catholics. The end result? Everyone "knows" that Republicans are religious and that Democrats are not.

Take the 2004 election. George W. Bush was viewed as the candidate who inspired religious voters. John Kerry? He was seen as someone who wouldn't talk about religion except in African-American churches. That really wasn't the truth: Kerry talked about his faith in his acceptance speech, he discussed Catholic influences on his politics during the debates, and he attended mass nearly each week. But many voters and journalists just didn't buy that he was truly religious. (Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton are the two obvious exceptions to this rule; it's perhaps not a coincidence that they're also the only two successful Democratic presidential candidates in the past 40 years.)

It's no wonder Democrats are frustrated. Some might look at the poll numbers and revert to form—give up, go back to ignoring religion, and thus confirm the rap against them. But before they do, they might want to take a look at the campaign of Tim Kaine, Democratic lieutenant governor and now gubernatorial candidate in Virginia.

Kaine is a Catholic who weaves his faith into nearly every speech, debate, and even some commercials. He's not without his critics, and it's not yet clear whether the decision will pay off for him. As of mid-September, he was neck and neck in the polls with Republican opponent Jerry Kilgore. But Kaine has already accomplished something few other Democrats can claim: No one questions his sincerity.

He's done it by talking about his Catholicism early and often, taking away the charge that it's a purely political gam-

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bit. Unlike many Democrats who try to sound like Bill Clinton but come off as Jerry Falwell crossed with an android, Kaine talks like himself. He not only doesn't apologize for his religious beliefs, he even wields them as a weapon. As a consequence, Kaine appears to have neutralized the faith issue, freeing himself to make his case to voters about how he would deal with the state's economy, education, and health care. Win or lose, Kaine is already showing Democrats how to navigate the faith issue. It's not enough to get religion; they also have to get real.

Religious education

Sometimes, Tim Kaine doesn't understand his fellow Democrats. "[They] will say, 'Hi, I like to windsurf. I got married. I got a couple of kids. Here is where I went to college,'" when introducing themselves to voters, he explains. "People will share all kinds of things about themselves, but they won't share their faith. If you share the less important things in your life, why wouldn't you talk about the most important thing?" Kaine has just spent the day crisscrossing southwest Virginia—a townhall meeting in Marion, a peach festival in Stuart—and he has no such problem bringing up his religion with voters.

It may, in fact, be difficult to find a voter who *doesn't* know he spent time working at a Catholic mission in Honduras. So far, Kaine has mentioned it at each campaign stop, reflecting on the way that work shaped his devotion to public service. In a debate back in July, Kaine referenced the experience when talking about his opposition to the death penalty and abortion: "I came back from Honduras, having worked with poor kids, with a renewed respect for the sanctity of life." Even his campaign ads mention faith. "The Bible teaches that we can accomplish great things when we work together," he says in one.

It's almost too much. While posing for a photo with Kaine, the ninth-grade Junior Miss Peach mentions something about coming over from Honduras, and he lights up. "I was a missionary in Honduras!" Miss Peach, puzzled, explains that she was talking about the Honduras Coffee Company just down the street. Kaine is so enthusiastic, however, that it's hard to dismiss him as just faking religion. And the voters who show up to his campaign events seem to share his belief that Democrats should fight their image as being hostile to religion. "We've been made the bad guy," Jane Larimer tells me at the Marion town hall meeting. "We go to church, too," adds Ralph Booher.

Indeed, talking about religion isn't just a way to win over Republicans—or even swing voters. Nearly 60 percent of Democratic voters attend church each month, and they wouldn't mind candidates who seem more like them. University of Akron's John C. Green, who studies religion and politics, explained to me that few Americans know what a governor actually does, but they can relate to his faith, which becomes shorthand for values and for being real. Kaine agrees: "[Voters] want to see that you have a moral yardstick."

But it isn't a matter of simply talking about religion—plenty of Democrats have waded into those waters recently, and not always with success. Candidates, experts like Green say, need to be able to communicate their faith in a way that is personal and sincere. Not everyone can—or should—talk in the cadence of a preacher or country revivalist. What they can do, however, is show how their faith made them who they are.

For Kaine, that story starts in Honduras. A native of Kansas City, Kaine found after his first year at Harvard Law School that he needed to take a break—to get his head "screwed on the right way," as he says. He decided to volunteer at a Honduras mission that he had first visited as a Catholic high school student; he worked closely with a Catholic missionary named Jim O'Leary, teaching carpentry and welding and religion to vocational students. O'Leary, Kaine says, had a "level of interaction with people [that] was so up close and immediate.... It was such an obvious outgrowth of his faith that it made me decide, 'That's the kind of person I want to be.'" After returning to the States and graduating from law school, Kaine moved to Richmond and joined the city council, eventually becoming the city's mayor in 1998. He attends St. Elizabeth's, an integrated Catholic church in the city where he sang in its gospel choir for 14 years. ("When I got elected mayor, that meant Wednesday practice night was not an option.")

A fighting faith

In this Virginia gubernatorial campaign, Kaine's faith comes up informally on the stump. But he has also made a conscious decision to raise it in the context of his opposition to the death penalty. Since 1976, Virginia has executed more prisoners than any state other than Texas. But Kaine has been a longtime opponent of its use. In 1987, while representing a death-row inmate convicted of murdering a widow, he told reporters before the man's execution: "Murder is wrong in the gulag, in Afghanistan, in Soweto, in the mountains of Guatemala, in Fairfax County... even in the Spring Street Penitentiary [here]." During his campaign for lieutenant governor, he also called for a state moratorium on the death penalty.

Throughout the campaign, Kaine's opponent—former attorney general Jerry Kilgore—has pounced on that opposition. In their July debate, Kilgore suggested that Kaine might offer clemency to all death row inmates. Yet Kaine swung back with his faith. Kaine responded, "Jerry—I'll state it again, and I'll state it clearly: I am not going to apologize to you for my religious belief that life is sacred." For the record, Kilgore told me that his criticism has nothing to do with Kaine's religion—"This is about his public policy views." Indeed, Kaine's response is the type of thing you're more likely to hear from Republicans, or conservative judicial nominees.

And it's worked. For the last few years, Republicans have used faith not only as a way to attract more votes, but also as an effective weapon. Last year, they sent mailings

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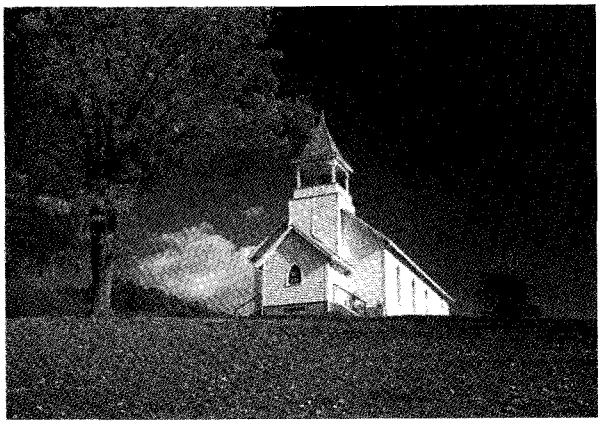

Galilee Baptist Church in Independence, Virginia; Getty Images

throughout West Virginia and Arkansas, suggesting that Democrats wanted to ban the Bible. More recently, conservatives have complained that Democrats questioning Supreme Court nominee John Roberts's views on abortion are attacking his Catholic faith. Kaine, however, has attracted criticism for being a flip-flopper, because while he opposes the death penalty and abortion as a matter of faith, he states he'll uphold Virginia's laws permitting them. (Kaine's campaign says that he is pro-choice, although he has supported restrictions on abortion, such as a ban on the so-called "partial-birth" procedure.) "It does have a feel of, 'I voted for it before I voted against it,'" said a political analyst observing the race, referring to John Kerry's infamous line last year that he voted for the $87 billion for Iraq before he voted against it.

Kaine's position is the same one Mario Cuomo promoted two decades ago on abortion, when it was greeted with howls of derision from conservative Catholics. So far, the Church has stayed silent on Kaine's muddled compromise, although other religious conservatives have not. "It is difficult to talk about his faith but then say he's unwilling to apply it," said Victoria Cobb, executive director of The Family Foundation of Virginia, an offshoot of James Dobson's conservative Focus on the Family.

Despite the criticism he's received, there is evidence that Kaine's nuanced positions—"I'm not going to cross my fingers when I take that oath," he explains to voters—might be paying off. According to a July Mason-Dixon poll, 55 percent of likely Virginia voters said they would consider voting for a candidate who opposes the death penalty but won't block executions, compared with only 27 percent who said they wouldn't. Perhaps more tellingly, Kilgore has recently backed away from attacking Kaine on social issues and has instead seized on the thorny issue of immigration and Kaine's record as Richmond mayor. (A more recent *Washington Post* poll noted that 41 percent of registered voters think Kaine's views on the issues are just about right, versus just 27 percent who think he's too liberal.)

And that means Kaine may have already won a major victory. Too many Democratic candidates, particularly in more conservative areas of the country, never get past the question of whether their faith is sincere and onto the next level, at which they can debate issues of substance and not religious character. The Virginia gubernatorial race will likely not be decided on the matter of candidates' religiosity or their positions on traditional "moral values" issues. So every time Kaine answers a question about his professional background or his position on Virginia's flood preparedness, it is a sign that he has neutralized the religion issue that trips up so many of his partisan colleagues.

Preaching from the choir

Kaine isn't the only Democrat making a leap of faith. Even though Dean might not have helped his cause by stating in June that the Republican Party is "pretty much a white Christian party," the DNC he chairs has hired a former congressional staffer to develop their religious outreach program. House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has established a Faith Working Group, and members in both chambers of Congress have invited a series of progressive religious leaders to sit down and talk with them. Democrats note that their governing philosophies and policies—combating poverty, expanding health-insurance coverage, and promoting civil rights—dovetail with religion and faith. "Democrats really tend to get the Good Samaritan principle; that the purpose of life is to serve God, but also serve your neighbor," Kaine said.

In addition, next year's election cycle features several Democratic candidates—including Bob Casey of Pennsylvania, who will face Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) in what promises to be next year's most-watched Senate contest, and U.S. Rep. Harold Ford (D-Tenn.), who is running for the Senate seat that Majority Leader Bill Frist is vacating—who will be talking about their faith on the trail.

As Al Gore and Howard Dean have already learned the hard way, however, Democrats can't get away with mouthing religious platitudes. It only works if their religiosity seems real.

On that Saturday in August, before heading over to Galax, Va.'s, 70th Annual Old Fiddler's Convention, Kaine walked into a tiny fiddle shop. Inside, a bluegrass band consisting of four young men—one playing the banjo, one on stand-up bass, one playing guitar, and the other manning the fiddle—was playing a catchy tune, which prompted Kaine's wife to dance a jig. Once the song was over, Kaine surged toward the band, whipped out a harmonica, and began jamming with the foursome.

The song they played was the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." Kaine's performance on harmonica wasn't spectacular, but it was certainly better than what most politicians (and journalists) could muster. After a couple of verses, the former gospel choir member stopped playing the harmonica and began singing:

Will the circle be unbroken
By and by, Lord, by and by
There's a better home a-waiting
In the sky, Lord, in the sky ◆

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Measure for Measure

The president's school reform law rests on the belief that its high-stakes tests are fair and accurate. But the Bush aide who designed the law has his doubts. And the Dallas schools have a better way.

By Thomas Toch

If any school should be a poster child for President Bush's signature education reform, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), it's Herbert Marcus Elementary School. The inner-city Dallas, Texas, school is exactly the kind that the law was designed to improve. It's a shabby, overcrowded place on the edge of a grim industrial zone, where lunch starts at 10 a.m. to handle the school's 1,140 students, nearly all of whom live in poverty, two-thirds of whom don't speak English as a first language, and whose parents have on average a 7th-grade education.

But the school has done just about everything right in recent years. Principal Conce Rodriguez has introduced reforms that require students to wear uniforms and teachers to submit weekly progress reports on every student in every subject. There's an expanded pre-kindergarten program, teacher-attendance incentives, and a big tutoring project. Rodriguez even hired a "community liaison," who has expanded the school's PTA membership to 700, the largest in Dallas. On a typical day, there are 50 parents volunteering at the school. Marcus' 97 percent student attendance rate is one of the highest in the city.

The changes at Marcus have paid dividends in the classroom. Under NCLB, the Dallas schools must test kids in reading and math every year between 3rd and 8th grade, and under Dallas' system of rating those test results, Marcus placed 19th out of the city's 206 schools, a significant accomplishment for a school with such difficult demographics. Marcus produced six more months of learning in a single school year than some other Dallas schools with equally disadvantaged students.

But that's Dallas' system of rating schools. The state of Texas, as required by NCLB, reads the scores differently. Under that federally-mandated rating, Marcus fares much worse—it gets a middling "acceptable" score, which places it only 76th in the city. That's one step away from being labeled failing under NCLB.

The discrepancy isn't the product of fuzzy math. It's the result of competing ideas about how to use test results. NCLB's strategy is to cast a bright light on student performance and impose reforms on schools that don't measure up. To do this, it mandates that student populations be judged once a year against a fixed state standard, while Dallas measures changes in individual student performance from one year to the next.

Other Dallas schools are finding themselves similarly penalized by NCLB. Schools ranked 2nd, 5th, 8th, and 16th under the city's rating system were ranked 94th, 77th, 83rd, and 107th in the Texas NCLB regime. At the same time, the school that placed 3rd under the state system was ranked 25th under Dallas'.

The sense that Texas' NCLB ratings are unfair has demoralized the staff at schools like Marcus. Several of Rodriguez's veteran teachers have left in frustration for wealthy suburban school districts where they felt their achievements would be more fairly recognized, staff members at Marcus say. Keeping good teachers is always a struggle for inner-city schools, and in many cases, NCLB has made things worse.

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Since shortly after its passage, the law has been under heavy attack—from congressional Democrats who say the administration hasn't invested the money it promised to implement the law, from Republican state legislators who resent the federal intrusion, and from teacher union leaders who never liked test-based accountability in the first place. But there have been other, less widely publicized, indictments of NCLB from parents, teachers, and principals who support high-stakes testing but see how NCLB is playing out in the classroom.

Educators in impoverished neighborhoods argue that the law's criteria for school success don't sufficiently take into account of how immensely far behind many of their students are when they start school. Educators and parents in affluent communities, where students routinely score above state standards, have a different complaint: that the NCLB accountability system is leading to a dumbing down of their schools' curricula. Many testing experts, meanwhile, point out that NCLB creates a host of perverse incentives, including encouraging states to set their academic standards low to reduce the number of their schools labeled "failing" under the law—the opposite of what NCLB's authors intended.

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings has responded to these charges with modest retreats, loosening some of the criteria by which schools are labeled failing so that fewer of them will be. These steps may buy the administration some short-term political relief. But they don't address the law's core problem: NCLB doesn't accurately measure the extent to which schools are improving student achievement.

This is no small flaw. The failure of public schools to educate America's most disadvantaged students is the country's most glaring and abiding social and moral problem. Over nearly two decades, a rough national consensus has developed to improve schools by holding them accountable for their students' performance via high-stakes tests. But the belief that the tests are fair and accurate is the linchpin of this whole system. And that belief is weakening. Even the Bush aide who helped design NCLB has his doubts. That's why it's worth looking at the Dallas school system, not just as an example of what's wrong with NCLB, but as a model of how to fix it.

The hardest assignments

Why does the Dallas school rating system do a better job of identifying high-performing schools than Texas' NCLB-driven system? The answer lies in the different ways the two systems define student performance. Under NCLB, Texas measures school performance based on a system called "adequate yearly progress," which calculates the percentage of various student populations that annually meet or exceed the state's academic standards; in other words, NCLB measures the progress of student groups towards a universal fixed point.

Dallas, by contrast, measures individual student progress from a relative starting point. It compares a pupil's current test scores with the same pupil's scores a year earlier. A school in Dallas wins a high rating if its students on average score higher than would have been predicted based on those same students' prior level of achievement and if the school's performance overall is better than that of other schools with the same demographics. It earns a low rating if its students perform worse than would have been predicted.

Unlike NCLB, the effect of Dallas' approach is to factor out the disadvantages (or advantages) that students bring to school because of the quality of prior instruction or their family backgrounds. Instead, it measures only the amount of knowledge that the school itself—or indeed, an individual teacher—is responsible for imparting. It calculates, in other words, the amount of "value added" by each school.

By doing so, the "value added" school-rating metric provides a more accurate picture of which schools are actually educating their students well. It is also fairer to schools and teachers working with the most disadvantaged kids. It pressures them to perform without penalizing them for taking on the hardest assignments in education. Conversely, the system doesn't reward rich schools with privileged students merely for standing still. Passing the state test, an easy task for many of their students, is not good enough.

This greater accuracy and fairness in turn provides a host of other advantages. It offers districts and states a firmer basis upon which to mete out rewards to good schools and sanctions to bad ones. It gives teachers clearer pictures of how individual students are progressing, making it a more useful diagnostic tool. It gives principals a system of measuring teacher ability—a system that even most teachers who work under it think is fair. It potentially offers parents much more accurate and fine-grained information than they can currently get on how individual schools and teachers are performing, thus making the job of choosing the right school easier. And it avoids some of the perverse incentives that NCLB has created to set standards low or otherwise game the system.

Experience has borne out these benefits. In places such as Dallas where a value-added metric has been tried, district officials say, it has proven superior in pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of different teachers. When Dallas researchers looked at the city's schools with the highest ratings under its value-added system, it found that they indeed had all the attributes associated with good schools. They were orderly and safe. Teachers knew their subjects and their students well. Students who fell behind were able to get help outside of class. And principals were able to recruit top teachers and, perhaps most important, push out bad ones.

Robert Mendro, the district's research director, says

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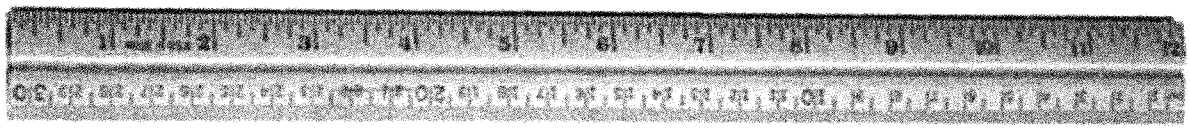
Dallas' testing system pressures inner-city school teachers to perform without penalizing them for taking on the hardest assignments in education. Conversely, it doesn't reward rich schools with privileged students merely for standing still.



that the Dallas schools such as Marcus that have used the student and teacher information that value-added testing gives them to target reforms have outperformed their peers. His only regret is that more Dallas schools haven't done so. Indeed, district-wide test scores have fluctuated in Dallas since the introduction of value-added testing in the early 1990s—a function, he says, of the fact that the Dallas accountability system offers only modest rewards for high performing schools and lacks tough consequence for schools that fail to improve.

Tennessee has also put the value-added metric to good use. In 1992, education officials began giving every school a value-added rating and they taught educators how to use the value-added analyses to target schools and teachers for improvement. Subsequently, Tennessee test scores trended up during the 1990s. Researchers at the University of Tennessee found that average math scores rose in 40 percent of the state's school districts and declined in only 8 percent between 1991 and 1999. Half as many districts improved in reading, but an even higher percentage moved up in language arts and science. What's more, the study found that the improving districts improved a lot. Their students opened a 1.7-year gap in math proficiency between the 3rd and 8th grades, and a 2-year gap in reading. "You could definitely see the systems that were using the value-added information and those that weren't," state testing director Mary Reel told me. The lesson: No school rating system will raise test scores by itself. But when a value-added system is tied to in-school follow-through, the results can be impressive.

Bush's brain

Recently, I spoke with Sandy Kress, a veteran school reformer now with the law firm of Akin Gump. Dallas' value-added school rating system, he told me, is a "sophisticated tool" and "more appropriate" than the president's NCLB rating system. And Kress should know. He helped design both systems.

A Treasury Department aide in the Carter administration and later chairman of the Dallas Democratic Party, Kress was chosen in 1990 to lead a school reform commission for the district. Looking for a way to motivate the city's schools, Kress learned that the district's research staff had tinkered with a school incentive system in the mid-1980s that had used simple value-added ratings. The staff hadn't had the resources to resolve the technical challenges they faced, and they shelved the plan. Kress dusted it off, worked with statisticians on his task force (one member was an epidemiologist), the district's staff, and outside researchers to refine it, and made it the cornerstone of the commission's recommendations.

The Dallas school board embraced Kress's reform blueprint, and in 1992, the value-added testing model became the basis for a citywide accountability system that gave substantial financial rewards to top-rated schools and targeted low performers for reform.

Kress's work on the commission, and in particular his innovative accountability plan, landed him a seat on the Dallas school board in 1992. It also attracted the attention of Texas Lt. Gov. Bob Bullock, a friend of Kress's since law school. Bullock named Kress the head of the accountability sub-committee of a statewide education reform commission that he was leading for Democratic Gov. Ann Richards. By 1993, Kress had created for the state's Democratic leadership the Texas school accountability system that eventually helped George W. Bush win the White House.

Bush had sought out Kress when he captured the Texas governorship in 1994 and turned to him again in crafting the no-child-left-behind theme that played so well during the 2000 presidential campaign. Bush brought Kress, by then a friend and ally, to Washington with him as a special assistant, and the former Carter official played a key role in shaping and winning congressional passage of NCLB, the signature domestic policy accomplishment of the president's first term.

But as Kress's reform efforts progressed from Dallas to Austin to Washington, the value-added concept fell away. Texas policymakers (and later officials with the Bush presidential campaign and the White House) were looking for a practical concept that liberals and conservatives could agree on; arguing that every student

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should be held to a single standard made sense to most voters. Judging students not against some objective standard but against themselves, they worried, would merely create a double standard—one for high achievers, one for low. Moreover, the value-added method was a relatively new idea, and few states had the computers or skilled statisticians to administer it.

I first discussed NCLB with Kress in late 2001 in his large corner office in the White House's Eisenhower Executive Office Building, just as Congress was about to pass the law. He was straightforward in suggesting that value-added ratings were "a whole lot fairer" to schools than the NCLB rating system would be. The NCLB system would favor wealthy schools, he acknowledged.

Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle were just as aware as Kress was of NCLB's shortcomings—and of the importance of seizing the moment. George Miller, a California liberal and the ranking Democrat on the House Education and Workforce Committee, in particular, saw NCLB as an opportunity to pressure schools to help poor and minority students. Miller and his allies were willing to use a far-from-ideal system of rating schools because they had a chance to focus national attention on traditionally underserved students. "If we waited for statisticians and psychometricians to get [school evaluation] right [in every state] we'd never get anything done [for disadvantaged kids]," said Miller's education aide at the time.

So, eager to make good on his campaign claim that he was a "compassionate conservative," and with even congressional liberals backing his plan, the president introduced NCLB on his third day in office. Eleven months later the bill was back on his desk for signing.

Bubble boys

NCLB's accountability system was, Kress and the others believed, the best that could be achieved in 2001, and they were probably right. But the flaws in its testing mandate have become more and more evident with each passing year. In particular, education insiders say that NCLB's rating system holds schools responsible for factors they can't control. Studies have shown that such things as English proficiency, family income, and parental education have a major influence on test scores, but NCLB, by judging schools on the basis of whether enough students pass a set of tests once a year instead of on how much schools increase students' learning over the course of a year, as the value-added model does, fails to account for that reality. Respected measurement expert and accountability advocate Stephen Raudenbush of the University of Michigan has declared NCLB "scientifically indefensible."

The flaws in the law virtually invite schools to game the system in various unproductive ways. To increase their scores, critics say, many schools lavish disproportionate attention on so-called "bubble" students—those who score just below the state standard. The rationale is clear, if cynical: The easiest way to avoid being labeled failing is to push these marginal students over the line. The more difficult students often get less help as a result. And while timetables built into the law will eventually force schools to deal with those students, there is, perversely, no incentive in the law for schools to focus on their more capable students. Indeed, research by value-added advocate William Sanders has shown that the rate of progress for high-achieving students in low-performing schools in Tennessee has actually declined since the implementation of NCLB.

Defying political gravity

The value-added methodology, by contrast, doesn't create such incentives to focus on a handful of students. Under the system, every child's improvement counts the same towards the school's overall rating. And the methodology itself is widely seen by those who use it as fairer and more accurate. Value added should thus make it easier for teachers to accept the idea of higher pay for outstanding performance and for working in the toughest schools—changes many see as important next steps in reforming education. Indeed, Dallas is already doing this. Teachers at schools with high value-added scores get financial bonuses.

Many of the obstacles to the widespread use of value-added ratings have been overcome in recent years. Thanks in part to the passage of No Child Left Behind, schools all over the country are on their way to testing every year from 3rd to 8th grade—a prerequisite for the value-added methodology. States are also beefing up their computer and statistical resources. Researchers are still working to address some of the toughest technical issues raised by the value-added method, such as how to measure students who move from school to school and how to compare scores on a subject year-to-year when the curriculum changes. But enough progress has been made that more and more states are looking at the value-added idea.

Ohio and Pennsylvania have launched their own value-added systems, and New York City, the nation's largest school district, plans to do the same. In the United Kingdom, the Blair government is instituting a national value-added school-rating program. And even U.S. Secretary of Education Spellings has arranged a panel to consider assessment alternatives that might include value added. If Spellings doesn't wind up advocating the value-added metric for NCLB, Kress hopes Congress will. "[Value added] ought to be one of the central improvements made to NCLB when it's reauthorized in two years," he told me.

There's an argument for replacing the adequate year-

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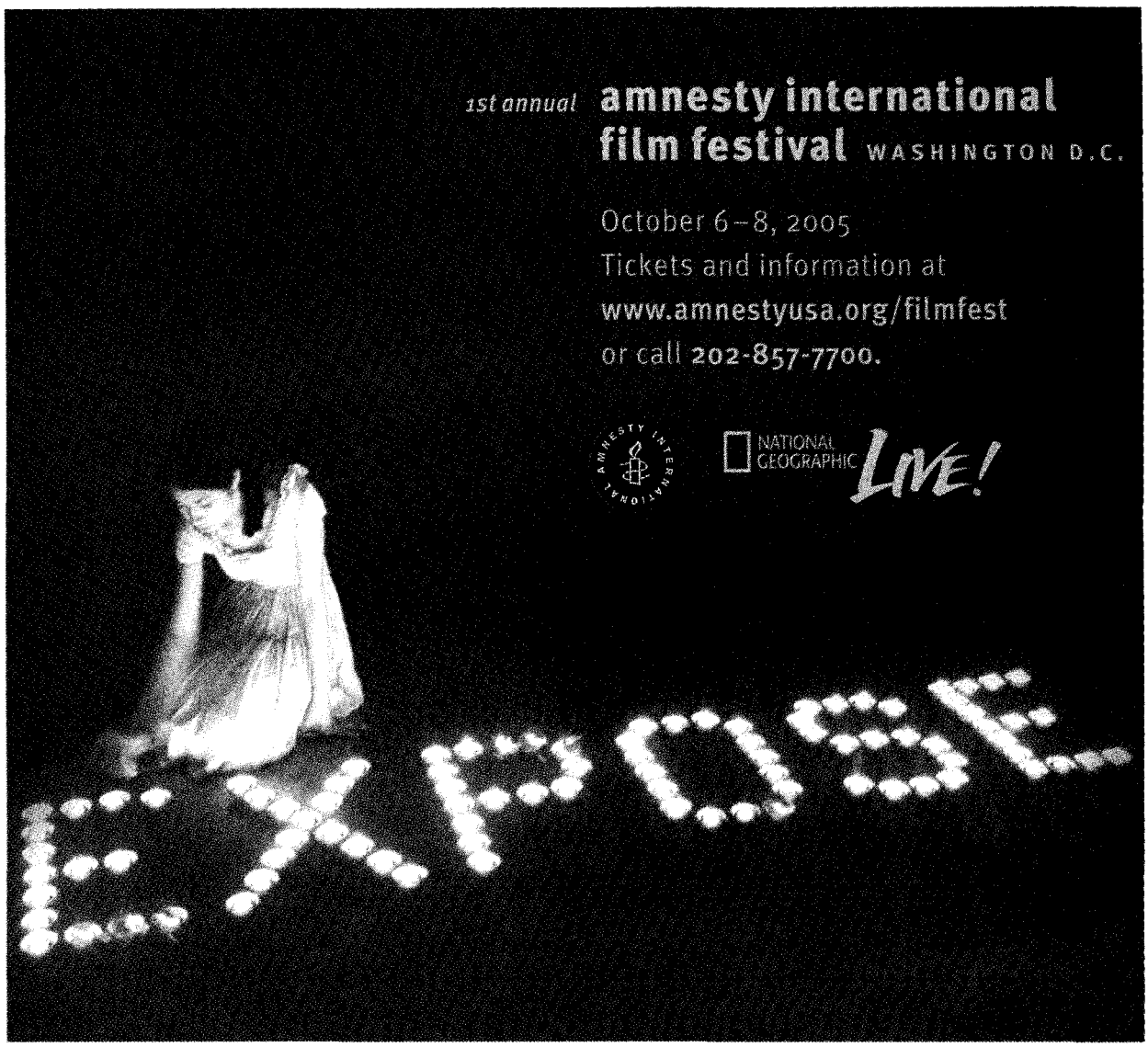
ly progress method mandated by NCLB with value-added. But the political obstacles to doing so would be considerable. The idea that there should be one standard for all students, regardless of race or income, and that all schools should be held responsible for meeting those standards, is the gravity that holds the liberal and conservative sides of the school reform movement together. Moreover, setting that single standard for all students does seem to have the effect of lifting the aspirations of parents, students, and teachers in many low-income schools, and sparking a sense of panic that is not unhelpful given the dismal performance of many of these schools. Dropping the standards approach entirely makes no sense politically or policy-wise.

One solution might be to publish scores from both the standards-based and value-added methods but to tie rewards and sanctions only to the latter. Another would be to combine the two ratings strategies. That's what Dallas has done in recent years, Tennessee wants to do, and value-added advocates like Sandy Kress support.

From the outside, Marcus Elementary doesn't look like much. The front yard is a derelict landscape of dirt and crab grass. Torn shades hang awry in the school's aging window frames. But its library is bustling, its classrooms are lively, and its hallways are filled with students' work. It's not what you'd imagine a school filled with desperately poor, non-English-speaking students would be like. But seeing it up close, you can begin to imagine a better future for American education.

Marcus' Principal Rodriguez, a short, cheerful man in his mid-30s, told me when we met in his spare, painted-cinderblock office, that his emotions were split between an excitement at the possibilities offered by value added and the problems he has to deal with because of No Child Left Behind. He was pleased that the Dallas rating system has recognized Marcus for the strong school that it is—even as he chafed at the fact that under NCLB he's expected to produce the same results as his counterparts in rich school systems like nearby Highland Park. "One system's fair," he told me. "One isn't." ◆



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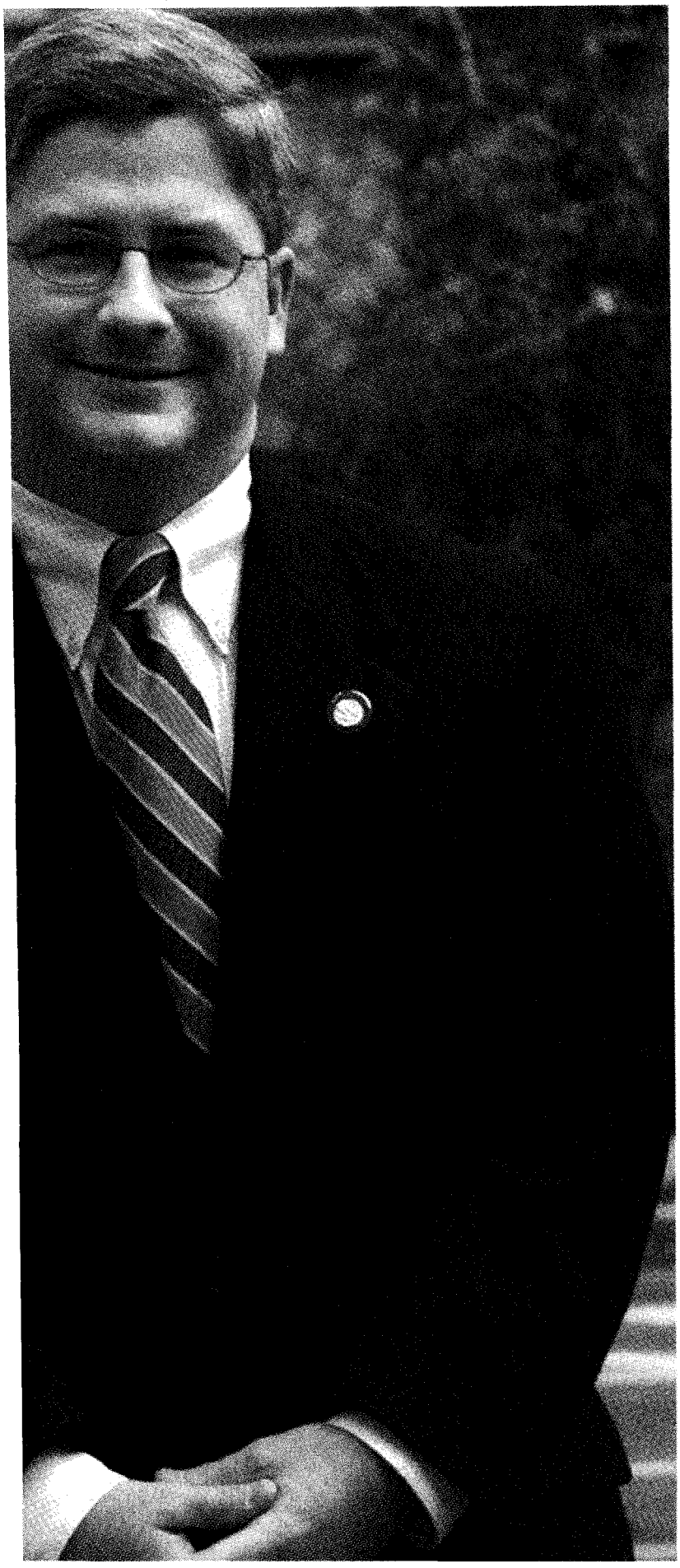

Getting Ahead in the GOP

Rep. Patrick McHenry and the art of defending the indefensible.

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

His name, you notice immediately, is *nearly* an American hero's.

Rep. Patrick McHenry, 29-years old and a freshman Republican Congressman, is sitting calmly in front of an "ABC World News Tonight" camera, his prematurely grey hair parted on the side and pulled thick over his scalp. He is waiting for the show to begin. It is mid-July and a particularly perilous political moment. The House majority leader and conservative power broker, Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Texas), is in hot water for taking a series of ethically sketchy trips—to the Mariana Islands, to Scotland, and to Russia—funded by lobbyists whose clients happen to have benefited from loopholes DeLay helped write into federal law. Even for Congress, this is shameless stuff and, with rumors of an indictment imminent, many conservatives are backing away from DeLay. But if the House leader has a more committed supporter on the planet Earth than Patrick McHenry, he is certainly not an elect-

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ed member of the United States Congress. McHenry is one of only 20 Republican representatives who signed on with DeLay's ultimately failed attempt to rewrite the House ethics process to grant himself effective immunity from indictment. DeLay needs something—a diversion, dynamite in the distance.

And here is McHenry. As the camera turns on, his face snaps into a bank teller's automatic smile. McHenry is the kind of young person whom other young people can't stand because he comes across as if he's been prepping his whole life to be 40. His voice is high-pitched, his tone world-weary, measured, sighingly cynical. Twenty-nine years old, he's seen it all before. "This is just the pot calling the kettle black," he says, arguing that Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) also took a trip she didn't fund herself. This is the Republican line of the day, even though Pelosi's trip was a non-profit-funded visit to a U.S. naval base while DeLay's was a St. Andrews golf vacation financed by indicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Nevertheless, McHenry's eyebrows temple upwards, neat geometries of piety. "They call their own failure to disclose travel a mere oversight. But when Republicans do it, they call it an ethical scandal." *Dynamite in the distance.* The news report pivots, and ABC correspondent Brian Ross spends most of the rest of the segment affirming that Democrats, too, have taken some trips they haven't paid for. *A pox on both their houses.* For McHenry, this is mission accomplished.

No political movement can survive on talking points alone. It requires an endless succession of faces, flesh and bone, elected officials willing to impose their smiling mugs in front of the camera even when the talking points are ridiculous. In the nine months since he came to Washington, McHenry has cultivated a role as a kind of fraternity pledge for the House leadership, willing to do the dirty work on behalf of crusades that the rest of his caucus will no longer touch. He was still pumping Social-Security privatization this summer, months after the GOP leadership had given up on the bill. He was still attacking Terri Schiavo's husband after other Republicans, with an eye toward opinion polls, clammed up. And in June, he was summoned by the cable networks to defend Karl Rove after it began to appear likely that the president's chief strategist had identified Valerie Plame as a CIA agent while talking to reporters.

McHenry is perhaps the most successful and precocious of the endless string of *those guys,* the youngish Republican representatives who show up on cable television to defend the indefensible. But McHenry has also mastered, far more quickly than most, the inside game, the art of cultivating personal relationships with the powerful. Soon after moving to Congress, McHenry hired Grover Norquist's press secretary as his own. More recently, he's been dating Karl Rove's executive assistant.

For his labors and for his promise, McHenry has won committee assignments and leadership positions like a row of shined medals, commemoratives for heroisms rendered. He's the only freshman to be part of the majority whip's team. He is co-chair for communications of the National Republican Congressional Committee, an exalted post that entitles him to help frame the national message for GOP candidates around the country. "He's got an awful lot of promise," House Majority Whip Eric Cantor (R-Va.) told *National Journal* for a profile headlined "Boy Wonder." He has shared the stage with President Bush at the insurance industry's annual convention. Both DeLay and the man who replaced him as House Majority Leader, Rep. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.), have hosted fundraisers for McHenry, a rare privilege for a freshman. A puffy *Weekly Standard* piece praised McHenry's "tenacity."

When Newt Gingrich brought the Republican Party back to power in the House in 1994, he did it with a phalanx of gate-crashers—dentists, insurance agents, small businessmen—political rookies and ideologues, many of whom have recently been at odds with DeLay and the spendthrift House leadership. A decade on, the revolution has calcified into what is less an ideology than a system, a cluster of organizations that manage power and careers—a political machine. Like most of the post-Gingrich generation, McHenry's ultimate loyalty is less to principle or ideology than to the machine itself.

To understand the values and pathologies of an organization, it often helps to follow the career path of its most precocious stars. Henry Blodget, the famous late-1990s Wall Street TV analyst, made it by grasping that his employer, Merrill Lynch, wanted him to talk up stocks that his firm had an extra hidden financial interest in selling to an investing public eager to believe the normal rules of share prices were suspended. Similarly with Sammy Glick, the fictional young Hollywood up-and-comer in Budd Schulberg's satirical novel about the 1930s movie business *What Makes Sammy Run?*, who figures out that stealing scripts and snitching on members of the nascent screenwriter's union is the way to get ahead in the studio system. Patrick McHenry is the Henry Blodget, the Sammy Glick of Republican power in Washington. "What Patrick understands is the same thing that George Bush understood," the omnipresent conservative power broker Grover Norquist told me, "which is how the modern Republican Party works."

Taking credit

"You had to hand it to him. He was always improving. I mean, he was becoming more and more expert at being Sammy Glick. The way he was telling this story, for instance. He wasn't outlining it, he was acting it. What the story lacked in character and plot his enthusiasm and energy momentarily overcame."

—Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*

McHenry represents North Carolina's 10th congres-

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The GOP class of 1994 were gate-crashers —dentists, insurance agents, small businessmen. A decade on, the revolution has calcified into what is less an ideology than a political machine.

sional district, an in-between place where the hollows and dipping roads of Appalachia drop down into the golf courses and big lawns that spiral out from Charlotte. The district is caught in an aspirational middle zone, too: On a dark back road with a house maybe every half mile, with the lawns only mowed now and then and fingers of grass lingering listless upright in the heat like the unemployed, there's a wood sign tacked to a tree, the kind of sign that in a Bugs Bunny cartoon would say, "Moonshine this-away." But instead it says, "Cherryville Golf Shop." *The Almanac of American Politics* has called the Tenth the "most blue-collar district in America."

Historically, at least, that's on account of the old textile mills, great long brick masses with broken windows, slung along the train tracks. The mills have been shut down for decades now, the work long since sent off to Mexico or China. But they have left this district with a particular quirk. The people who live here, many of them descendants of the mill workers who now commute to service jobs in Charlotte suburbs, still bank with the credit unions that originated in the mills, taking advantage of the better loan terms that tend to come from non-profit financial institutions. This is significant because one of the first bills authored by McHenry, whose district has 172,000 credit union members, would make it much harder for government to regulate or block the conversion of credit unions into banks, a process that tends to benefit the credit union's directors (who get to cash in stock options and can sometimes make millions) and hurt the union's members, who can no longer borrow and save at the same generous terms.

McHenry's credit union bill, a high priority for the banking lobby, has received strong backing from DeLay. The Republican leadership awarded McHenry a seat on the House Financial Services Committee upon his arrival in Washington. "Most people would say it's the most plum assignment you can get," one conservative lobbyist told me, "because you can leverage it to do so much in fundraising." But first you have to prove yourself. Asking McHenry to author a bill that undermines the interest of half his constituents is the political equivalent of demanding a young Mafia enforcer kill his cousin as a test of loyalty. "It's a bill that a lot of us are watching," a conservative activist from Mecklenberg County who has been skeptical about McHenry told me. "It's pretty clear that here McHenry is picking Washington over his district, and we're interested to see if he pays any price for it."

The crowd that fills an old textile mill in Morganton, N.C., in early August to meet with McHenry is comprised mostly of elderly supporters, with one exception: a clutch of young, well-dressed women at the back, stickers pasted to their lapels, the hand-printed word "bank" with a crude red slash through it. During the question-and-answer session, they stand up and speak, a few in turn. They're members of local credit unions, they tell McHenry, and worry that their credit union could now convert to a bank, leaving them high and dry. The older ladies and gents at the front of the room turn around, a little befuddled; so far, they've been nodding agreeably every time the sweet-faced young man tells them he's been cutting their taxes; this is an unexpected bit of controversy.

McHenry handles it expertly. As the women at the back of the room speak, he nods constantly to show he's taking them seriously; and when he begins to speak, McHenry commands the room, his hands moving forward to punctuate each essential word, model U.N.-style. He's spoken with the leadership of their particular credit unions, the Congressman says, and the leadership strongly supports the bill. (That these credit union managers stand to benefit financially if their institutions convert into banks, he does not mention.) Credit union members may not be completely aware of the provisions of his bill; in any event, he'd be happy to "get with you" afterwards, to talk through the technical details of bank conversion. Then, with the room still unsettled, McHenry smoothly moves the discussion back to safe ground, focusing on big, national topics—the plans Republicans have for major tax cuts, for Social-Security reform, for defending marriage. The room bursts into spontaneous and lavish applause. There's something openly paternal about the way the crowd reacts to him—they want to like him, want him to be doing good, this kid with their values, their politics, these hills in his veins.

Exile in Cherryville

"The first time I saw him he couldn't have been much more than sixteen years old, a little ferret of a kid, sharp and

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quick. Sammy Glick…Always ran. Always thirsty."
–Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*

As it happens, McHenry's not even really from this district. He grew up in suburban Charlotte, the son of the owner of the Dixie Lawn Care Company, and after high school enrolled at North Carolina State. There, involved in politics, he displayed an early aptitude for translating conservative politics into street theater; in 1997, a sophomore, he stood on a Raleigh avenue as President Clinton's motorcade passed, a bearded Abe Lincoln mask over his head, and held a sign saying, "Who's sleeping in my bed?"

Halfway through his college career, McHenry left N.C. State, transferred to tiny Belmont Abbey College, and moved into a house off campus in the small nearby town of Cherryville. For a young man on the make, the move seemed an odd choice. Cherryville is a little, unprosperous town with nowhere to go and nothing to do, a place where middle-aged men walk along the side of the highway because the car broke down again. The town, in other words, is the kind of place that animates the nightmares of college juniors. As a long-term political strategy, however, the move made sense. The part of suburban Charlotte where McHenry had grown up was and is represented by a young, well-liked conservative, Rep. Sue Myrick (R-N.C.) who figured to be around for a while. Cherryville was just across the border in a solidly conservative district whose man in Washington, Rep. Cass Ballenger (R-N.C.), was into his eighth decade and whose career seemed to be winding down. And this very conservative town was represented in the State House by a Democrat.

At Belmont Abbey, McHenry moved quickly. "He always managed to get his work done… but he made it clear from the beginning that he was going to miss a lot of classes, that his political work came first," McHenry's advisor, history professor Francis Murray, told me. Soon after arriving at Belmont Abbey, McHenry founded the school's College Republican (CR) chapter, then launched a winning campaign for chairman of the state CR organization.

The College Republicans have legendarily been the starting point, the training and networking ground, for the careers of all of the party's most influential activists: Lee Atwater, Grover Norquist, Jack Abramoff, Karl Rove. And producing Roves and Atwaters, tactical geniuses and election-winners, is exactly what the organization is set up to do: The organization is a four-year crash course in how to win votes from conservatives, in electioneering, with its members running endlessly for College Republican state board, College Republican state treasurer, College Republican national committee. There's a balls-out element to these contests, to the infighting; when I talked to College Republicans in North Carolina, I heard constant, ridiculous allegations thrown at rivals within the organizations. This rival had an illegitimate son in Tennessee, that one paid for an abortion for some poor girl from Missouri. When I asked an innocent question about a network of political consultants in Raleigh, one College Republican stopped me immediately: "Surely you must have heard," he said ominously, his drawl thick, "about them *bisexual orgies*."

This training served McHenry well when, midway through his junior year, he declared his candidacy for the state House of Representatives. His opponent in the primary was a man named David Cline, a former county commissioner. McHenry prevailed upon College Republicans from around the state to volunteer, going door-to-door, and claimed in the course of his campaign that he was the most conservative candidate. The proof? He'd never voted to raise taxes, and once, as a county commissioner, Cline had. Cline said, essentially, *of course* he's never voted to raise taxes, he's a *college junior*. Didn't matter; the charge stuck—McHenry won. In the general election, he faced off against a connected, conservative Democrat, a businessman, Rotarian and ex-County Commissioner named John Bridgeman. McHenry, who seems to have been working from a limited bag of political tricks, claimed he was the most conservative candidate in the race. When that didn't work, he tried to link Bridgeman to the scandal-ridden Bill Clinton, charging that because Bridgeman was a Democrat, "he supported selling out the Lincoln bedroom." McHenry—keep in mind, a 21-year-old college student—lost. Bridgeman had managed to raise far more money, and one of the critical lessons McHenry's friends and advisors drew from the race, one told me, was that "Patrick had to get better at fundraising." Soon after he graduated from Belmont Abbey, he moved to Washington.

Political finishing school

"It's queer to think how many little guys there are like that, with more ability than push, sucked in by one wave and hurled out by the next, for every Sammy Glick who slips through and over the waves like a porpoise."
–Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*

"It wasn't like he was a Bill Gates, someone who was the smartest guy in the room or the most charismatic guy in the room or something like that," Dee Stewart, McHenry's former chief of staff and longtime political consultant, told me. "But he did something else just as special: He figured out what the system was, and he worked it harder than anyone I've ever met."

McHenry's first full-time job in Washington was with the conservative communications group DCI. It was quite a choice. If there is a center to Washington conservative dark arts, DCI is pretty much it. They were paid consultants, for instance, to the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth last year, although they are most known

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for attacking fellow Republicans. DCI's founder is Thomas Synhorst; his expertise lies in "astroturfing"—developing fake grassroots groups to front for conservative and corporate causes—and "push-polling," a subtle technique that can impart damaging information about a rival candidate in the guise of a hypothetical question for a poll. Synhorst conducted, for instance, push-polls for Bob Dole's presidential campaign in 1996, in which Iowans were asked if they would be more or less likely to vote for Steve Forbes if they knew that the candidate had a "promiscuously homosexual father."

This was McHenry's political finishing school. The recent graduate started work at DCI's New Media division in the fall of 1999; his main project was running a Web site, NotHillary.com, which peddled rumors that Hillary Clinton would run for president in 2000 in order to drum up conservative campaign contributions. Meanwhile, DCI was working for Karl Rove; Synhorst's group helped defeat Sen. John McCain in South Carolina that year with a series of notorious push-polls that, among other things, called McCain "a liar, a cheat, and a fraud." By June, with McCain no longer a factor and Bush breezing towards the nomination, McHenry used his connections to get an interview with Rove, who hired him to be the National Coalition Director for the Bush-Cheney campaign.

After the election, McHenry looked around for his next step. When a new administration sweeps into power, young partisans start looking for plum jobs—flipping through a book that is literally plum-colored to search for political appointee slots. The most coveted are jobs as "special assistants." Such positions require no substantive experience but put a young person in the room with an agency's principal decision-makers. They are also assignments that cannot be won without highly-placed contacts. So, when McHenry soon turned up as special assistant to the new Secretary of Labor, Elaine Chao, the wife of influential Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), it caught the attention of some powerful conservatives. "He had a reputation that preceded him," Norquist told me. "I was hearing from friends that Patrick was a rising star long before I met him."

There is a streak of impatience, urgency, get-aheadness that runs throughout McHenry's young career; he habitually stays at jobs for six or eight months, long enough to add a line to his résumé, make the necessary contacts, and then move on. McHenry stayed with Chao for less than six months; his credential in hand, he returned to North Carolina and began scoping out a second run for the Statehouse. He used the same tactic—claiming he was the most conservative candidate in the race—and with a weak field of candidates, he won. He spent the first half of 2003 attacking the moderates who ran the Statehouse when, almost as if on schedule, the local congressional seat opened up. The incumbent Ballenger had been making increasingly odd public statements (among other things, he attributed the breakup of his 50-year marriage to the presence of an American-Islamic relations association next door to his house) and soon was coaxed into retirement. Congressional seats don't come open too often in the one-party precincts of the South. Six months after he had taken his seat in Raleigh, McHenry announced that he was running for Congress.

I shot the sheriff

At 27, McHenry was only two years above the constitutional age requirement for running for Congress, though with his prematurely graying hair he could pass for 35. His real problem was that he had never worked a day in his life in the district as an adult. McHenry needed to get something relevant into his resume, quickly. So he took an alternate route: In the fall of 2003, he sat for the real estate licensure exam and, almost instantly, Patrick McHenry the political operative became Patrick McHenry the realtor, proprietor of "McHenry Real Estate." He didn't appear to do much business—local newspapers list no transactions and note that the "company phone number" he listed for state records was actually his personal cell phone—but "McHenry Real Estate" gave his campaign room to claim that he was the "one small businessman in the race."

Most politicians also need a local reputation, an organization, contacts, and a profile. McHenry didn't have much local profile—he was, his consultant Stewart says, "virtually unknown" in the district when his campaign began, having represented only 2 percent of it in the Statehouse. In contrast, also running for the Republican nomination were two local businessmen—Sandy Lyons and George Moretz—who were able to self-finance their campaigns, as well as David Huffman, the popular, 24-year sheriff of Catawba County.

That, according to the old rules of politicking, would have been that. The young up-and-comer would have been told—or made—to wait his turn while the more experienced men fought to claim their right to the district. But McHenry understood the new, emerging set of political rules. He may have been unknown in the district, but McHenry was known in Washington. Soon after he officially declared his candidacy, checks were coming in from conservative godfathers such as Norquist and from the PACs of powerful lobbies such as the American Medical Association and the National Home Builders Association. And while McHenry couldn't count on much of a local volunteer base, he could draw on his national contacts to staff his campaign with College Republicans. Volunteers from Alabama, Texas, and Missouri came to help out. In the North Carolina chapter, he brought in "what must have been every CR in the state," one volunteer told me, to knock on doors. When this seemed

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as if it might be coming up short, he applied another rule of Rove's GOP: Rules are made to be broken. His friends at the College Republican National Committee arranged to send 70 paid field operatives to work the district—a trip that may have violated the group's bylaws, which forbid the organization from taking a position in primaries. McHenry snuck into second place and a runoff against Sheriff Huffman.

Sheriff Huffman occupies a position on the political spectrum that might fairly be called lethally conservative. "Patrick's people called me anti-gun," he complained to me, "but I was the only sheriff in the state to vote to make it legal to carry a concealed weapon without a permit." This is an obvious point of pride for the sheriff. In the two-man race, he was the more established, the more well-known, and had staked out a political slot that was almost unimaginably right.

So how did McHenry convince voters he was the most conservative candidate? He simply *said so*. "It was our mantra," Elizabeth Beck, a former campaign worker and then-president of the UNC-Charlotte College Republicans, told me. "We told voters Patrick was the most conservative candidate in the race, that he was anti-tax, anti-gun control, and anti-abortion." The swarms of College Republicans also hustled: "We'd go knock on doors at 9 in the morning, and a lot of these places up in the rural areas seemed like it had been years since someone had knocked on their door—I never got turned away." Once inside, the College Republicans opened up campaign-bought portable DVD players and let McHenry's recorded address play away.

McHenry, a Catholic in an overwhelmingly Protestant district, also started attending Baptist youth groups. "I knew he was against abortion and against the homosexual agenda," Pastor Ruffin Snow, a Baptist minister from Hickory who is considered a major power broker in McHenry's district, explained to me. "But with him being Catholic, the most important thing was I asked him, actually, the same question I'm fixin' to ask you, Ben. I asked him, Patrick, if God were to call you today and ask you whether you deserved to go to heaven, would you be able in your heart to tell him you did? Because," the pastor added with a sly hint of the deep and dark, "everyone spends eternity *someplace*." Pastor Snow let that sink in and continued: "And Patrick said to me, 'yes, because even though I'm Catholic I'm also born-again, I've accepted Christ into my heart.' And that was good enough for me."

After a bitter election campaign, in which Bob Novak echoed the McHenry campaign's cooked-up charges of ethical improprieties against Huffman and the sheriff charged his challenger with throwing beer parties for underage students, McHenry won the runoff by 85 votes out of 30,000 cast, and trounced his Democratic opponent in November to win the congressional seat.

"No rules in a knife fight"

"There is no word in English to describe it. You could say gloat, smile, leer, grin, smirk, but it was all of those and something more, a look of deep sensual pleasure."

—Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*

Congress! McHenry arrived already a celebrity, thanks to his youth. C-SPAN recorded McHenry and his staff—virtually all of whom were fellow former College Republicans—setting up their office. In a first-day profile, the *Winston-Salem Journal* noted that McHenry had been more or less waiting for this moment since high school. When the youngest member of the 109th Congress headed for his first vote, "That's when it hits you like a freight train," he told the paper. "This is the first time you realize the responsibility voters have given you." The first vote he had to cast was for speaker, a foregone conclusion. "When they called out my name," McHenry told the *Journal*, "I stood up and said loudly, 'Hastert.'"

"What stood out about Patrick from the beginning," Charles Symington, the influential head of Independent Insurance Agents and Brokers of America's government affairs program, told me, "was he was interested not only in policy but also in politics, that he was willing to work hard and fight on behalf of the Republican leadership." The only thing that seemed strange, a conservative activist in North Carolina told me, was that "Patrick and his staff still seemed to have what you could call an obsessive involvement in College Republicans—this was a sitting Congressman and his staff, mind you, and they were making calls to try to go behind the scenes and figure out who was getting elected to the state board, kid stuff like that, what seemed like every week. It was odd."

The shape of the College Republican national organization was beginning to shift, mud underfoot, the friends and allies McHenry had made were losing influence and power. During the lead-up to the 2004 election, the College Republican National Committee (CRNC) sent out a fundraiser that specifically targeted, as *The Washington Post* put it, "elderly people with dementia," and misled them into thinking they were sending money to President Bush's reelection campaign. The letter became a low-level scandal in the national press, a story helped along by the pathos of the victims: elderly conservatives with little to live on who were sending their savings on to a bunch of bow-tied college kids, smirking at their swelling bank accounts. But things really hit the fan when the letter's author, a University of South Dakota senior named Paul Gourley (a close friend and ally of McHenry's), announced he was running for national chairman, and a series of quick endorsements by the outgoing CRNC National Chair and the leaders of major state delegations followed. An outraged caucus within the CRNC came

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Like most of the post-Gingrich generation, Rep. Patrick McHenry's ultimate loyalty is less to principle or ideology than to the GOP political machine itself.

together behind an insurgent, Michael Davidson.

College Republican campaigns are big money—costs can run in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. But the rewards are big, too: The chairman, who gets a $75,000 salary and benefits, manages a paid staff with an annual budget of $2 million in salary and expenses. And the fundraiser was seamy stuff, the kind of thing that elected officials fight like hell to distance themselves from. National political figures from Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, to Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.) and Texas Gov. Rick Perry endorsed Davidson. The House Ways and Means Committee Chairman, Rep. Bill Thomas (R-Calif.), even held a fundraiser for him. At the convention, things got competitive, then grotesque. Convention speakers were deleted out of the program at the last minute, replaced by figures who supported Gourley. Delegations switched allegiances for mysterious reasons in the dead of night; virtually everybody accused virtually everybody else of being gay. As *The New Republic*'s Franklin Foer reported in a recent account of the CRNC convention, the Gourley-Davidson contest began in earnest after Norquist reminded delegates from the podium that "there are no rules in a knife fight."

This was when Patrick McHenry, sitting in his congressional office, picked up the phone. The tradition in Congress has been that it's perfectly fine to endorse candidates, but it's a little below the office to get personally involved in the organization's races. But like his mentors in the Republican leadership, McHenry wasn't much for tradition. North Carolina's College Republicans had endorsed Davidson, and so McHenry and his chief of staff, Jason Deans, began to phone the leaders of the North Carolina College Republican chapters, asking for them to change their vote. "Patrick said that he had only won the election because of the field reps the [College Republican National Committee] had sent, that Davidson wouldn't send them again, and that Patrick wouldn't win reelection without the field reps, and if we wanted Patrick to stay in Congress, we'd back Gourley," Elizabeth Beck, then the chair of the College Republican chapter at UNC-Charlotte, told me. In other phone calls, McHenry was more blunt: "He told me, and several of my friends that we were done in politics if we didn't support him," another College Republican chapter president told me. (McHenry has admitted that he and Deans made the calls but denied that they threatened anyone's career). Over the course of two weeks, after a couple of a dozen calls, McHenry prevailed upon those in the North Carolina delegation to change their votes, removing three votes from Davidson's column and putting them in Gourley's. Gourley ended up winning by six votes; had North Carolina voted the other way, Davidson might have won.

Not dead yet

In late September, the day after Tom DeLay was indicted for criminally conspiring to funnel corporate money into state elections, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks tried to cast a hopeful spin on the situation, declaring: "The old team is dead." He meant that the indictment signaled an end to the kind of political world in which McHenry had ascended, where "loyalty to the team matters more than loyalty to the truth."

Dead? Well, maybe. But there remains a whole generation of conservatives in Washington who came up through that system and who have rallied to defend it. That includes McHenry, who appeared on FOX News the night that the indictment was announced to debate his 68-year-old Democratic congressional colleague Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-N.J.). The two batted their talking points back and forth—"it's a culture of corruption"; "no, it isn't"—when McHenry hit a little lower. Interrupting Pascrell, McHenry said he couldn't believe someone from New Jersey had the nerve to talk about ethics. Pascrell blew up, as did most of the Garden State delegation. McHenry later apologized to Pascrell privately, but never publicly. And the attack did nothing but burnish his image among fellow conservatives as a nervy team player.

"You know, I see him as someone who could someday be vice president," McHenry's political consultant Dee Stewart tells me. "Not president, because you've got to be more bipartisan for that, but a vice president, someone who could become a conservative legend." ◆

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Why Americans can't write political fiction.

By Christopher Lehmann

Whatever its many other deficiencies, American political reality has often seemed tailor-made for fictionalizing. Just consider the rich welter of issues and personalities that hover around our present-day national politics: Congress' special session on the Terri Schiavo case; the 2004 Swift Boat Veterans ads; the ongoing agons of the Valerie Plame case and the 9/11 commissions. We have a born-again dauphin commander-in-chief striving in countless ways to surpass his father's wan patrician legacy and usually failing. We have Justice Sundays, the Cindy Sheehan vigil, and the America Supports You Freedom Walk—events that beg for adaptation as low farce or high satire.

Or, dare one say it, literature. There is a broader point to American political fiction, easy to miss amid the familiar sound and fury of the nation's political and cultural life: Democratic politics *is* the country's national epic—with such key matters as the franchise, political representation and America's role in world affairs all adapting themselves over time to encompass the republic's preoccupations, for better or worse. Consider, just for starters, the genuine literary questions raised by our own political era's leading issue—the war in Iraq and the peculiarly American errand of coercing the Middle East into a state of political self-reinvention. The confident projection of American power into an alien political culture, rent by tribal divisions, mirrors back to us unexamined assumptions about our own national identity and purpose. Many of the same questions can be raised about the shoddy federal response to the collapse of New Orleans' physical infrastructure in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's devastation—a ghastly reverse-image of the confident projection of U.S. power abroad.

In the ever-accelerating information age, journalism has taken on the role of chronicling both the march of political events and the shifting character of the nation's political imagination. But technology and programming demands have made much political journalism far more shrill, instantaneous, and unreflective, and thus brought into still higher relief the literary virtues—reflection and depth of character chief among them—

Christopher Lehmann is an editor at *CQ Weekly* and the author of *Revolt of the Masscult.* His wife, Ana Marie Cox, has a political novel coming out in January in which no one's innocence is redeemed.

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Photograph by Debra McClinton

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that our political fiction should be delivering.

In considering how literature might grapple with the moral issues at the heart of today's politics, one could do worse than ask, what would George Orwell do? In *1984*, the political novel's most famous modern exemplar, Orwell reckoned with the most decisive forces loose in the modern world: not merely the rise of totalitarian political regimes, but also the triumph of a depersonalized mass culture, the humorless bureaucratized workplace, and the abolition of historical memory. Long after the Stalinist nightmare dissolved, *1984* has survived as literature—conjuring the vivid stink of Victory gin, the grim footage of mass carnage played for laughs, and the furtive state-forbidden sex of Winston Smith's Oceania. The novel's continued relevance was more than a function of Orwell's imaginative genius; it flowed at least in part from his service as a British propagandist during World War II, which awakened in him both a reverence for the democratic culture he had worked to save, as well as a nuanced understanding of the corruptions of politics and spirit that occur under totalitarian regimes shoring themselves up with propaganda campaigns.

To gauge the arrested development of American political novels, one need look no further than the pallid state of our own literary satire. Christopher Buckley now passes for the high-water mark of political satire in the nation's literature. In 1994, Buckley drew upon his experience as a speechwriter for Vice President George H.W. Bush to produce *Thank You for Smoking*, an engaging send-up of the grimly farcical rounds of advocacy for the tobacco industry, as well as of the excesses of its opponents. Since then, however, Buckley's novels have acquired a one-note tetchiness in both tone and subject. They read less like gimlet-eyed parody than gussied-up O'Reilly Factor transcripts.

His latest novel, *Florence of Arabia*, contains more pained winces than belly laughs. It is the saga of Florence Farfaletti, a Foreign Service agent covertly orchestrating an uprising in the fictional Islamic fundamentalist kingdom of Wasabia in the heart of the Middle East's "no fun zone." Every political force in Farfaletti's path is turned into a surrogate for the motifs on the contemporary political scene that irritate Buckley's own conservative sensibilities, making the clear point that politics is the sport of distasteful appeasers and politically correct prudes. The French are surrender-happy snobs; gay characters are raging queens; feminists are frigid scolds. Need I go on? Thank you.

And Buckley is arguably the best political novelist now going. Lest you think I'm picking on him for ideological grounds, consider *The Librarian*, also published last year by Larry Beinhart, the provocateur behind *American Hero*, which Barry Levinson later adapted into the film *Wag the Dog*. Beinhart's novel relates how college librarian David Goldberg, in the course of collecting archival documents for a wealthy political donor, stumbles upon a trove of material showing the incumbent president, Augustus Scott, a thinly disguised W.-figure now up for reelection, to be implicated in a boatload of nefarious conspiracies. They include, for starters, ballot-disrupting race riots in Florida and a plot to blow up the Statue of Liberty and a nuclear power plant. This is all done at the behest of big oil and to "steal the election" from a female Democratic challenger who served as a nurse in Vietnam while Scott evaded the draft.

An ultra-earnest book like *The Librarian* produces much the same self-distancing perspective on the political world as does a ham-fisted farce like *Florence of Arabia*—a vision of politics as the squalid self-interested manipulation of events beneath the dignity of any sane moral actor. The result is an odd political literature of principled non-engagement, wherein the task of protagonist and author alike is to rise above the subjects that propel character, plot, and literary experience. This arm's-length disdain for our literature typically shows that the political process is a bit like expecting all of Moby Dick to unfold without any mention of the whale.

Writers like Buckley and Beinhart are heirs to a longstanding distemper in American political fiction. They both look upon the political process as a great ethical contaminant and task their protagonists with escaping its many perils with both their lives and their moral compasses intact. What might be bracing satires wilt into two-dimensional fables in which the same basic lesson is learned over and over again: spurn the process and save your soul.

Joe Klein's much-praised, anonymously published book *Primary Colors*, a campaign-trail *roman a clef* based on Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential run, is perhaps our most influential recent variation on the theme. Just as its presidential aspirant Jack Stanton is transparently based on Bill Clinton, so is its narrator, the young black political operative Henry Burton, clearly modeled on former divinity student George Stephanopoulos. There are, to be sure, superficial differences: Stephanopoulos seems to be a self-tutored prig, and Henry comes by his moral pedigree via his dad, who was a civil rights-era preacher and political leader. But Henry spends most of the novel as Stephanopoulos spent his White House tour as domestic adviser: conspicuously fretting about the high compromises and low moral trespasses of his chosen political mentor.

Mainly, though, *Primary Colors* is a shallow novel about politics because it is a novel exclusively about the campaigning process—the media-centric business of gaining marginal advantage among a field of pandering presidential aspirants. As such, it's as two-dimensional as the process it professes to scorn; its moral dilemmas and its vision of political success turn alike on the packaging of mass sentiment in which nothing more is risked—and nothing more is at stake—than the tactical logic of spin. In this hermetic, process-dominated

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environment, Henry Burton's disillusion becomes just one more prepackaged sentiment. It's an ironic fulfillment of Eudora Welty's famous dictum that politics and literature should maintain a "private address"; *Primary Colors* is a novel where the process of politics decisively rules out the formation of literary character.

Klein's tale of seduction and abandonment by the adulated great leader interlocks closely with the plot trajectory of Robert Penn Warren's big message novel *All the King's Men*, published 50 years earlier and now being remade as a Sean Penn vehicle directed by Steven Zaillian. It's probably no coincidence that the name of Klein's narrator echoes that of Warren's—an aristocratic newspaperman named Jack Burden drawn into working for Willie Stark, the thinly disguised Huey Long character who propels Burden's own first-person account of political disillusion.

In most respects, Warren's novel has aged poorly. Its Faulknerian prose manages to be both purple and flat while its political reflections are just banal. ("Man is conceived in sin and born of corruption," runs Willie Stark's oft-quoted motto, "and he passes from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud"—a nugget of wisdom as hard-won as it is subtly voiced.) At the simple level of characterization, Jack Burden's odyssey is unpersuasive—his alleged innocence is more a product of tedious grad school soliloquizing than any discernible virtue. Likewise, Willie Stark's temptation of Burden into the lurid exercise of demagogic power is pasteboard populism, an opportunity to score cheap points against a discredited leader like Long—and the grievously distorted political persuasion he represented—on behalf of what is ultimately an aristocratic conception of Old South *noblesse oblige*. Yet Warren's overheated language of sin and corruption does hearken back to the odd moral fastidiousness that shapes so much of the obdurate badness of American political fiction.

merican letters famously came of age in conditions of frontier infatuation and intense individualism, and most American novelists treated public life, like most reminders of old world civilization, with marked suspicion. The first American renaissance roughly coincided with the rise of Jacksonian democracy; but in the 1830s, few writers dallied with the mass fascination with democratic forms that foreign visitors such as de Tocqueville found so absorbing. Hawthorne and Emerson openly derided the idea of political reform; Poe and Charles Brockden Brown turned their gaze morbidly inward. Meanwhile, America's most popular storytellers, James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving, hymned homely virtues, heartfelt romances, and unsophisticated accents, and had them all triumph over the sinister plottings of Europeans and American Indians.

Walt Whitman—a former clerk for the U.S. Department of the Interior—recognized that the true frontier of America was not, in fact, geographic, but political. With the most deadly political failure fresh in the nation's memory, Whitman, in 1871, issued his famous call for a distinctive, politically minded American literature in his essay "Democratic Vistas." A new national literature, Whitman argued, was the only force adequate to heal a newly sutured American nation. The country's "most fundamental want," Whitman wrote, was "the clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatures, far different, far higher in grade than any yet known, sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions, lands, permeating the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief, breathing into it a new breath of life, giving it decision, affecting politics far more than the popular superficial suffrage, with results inside and underneath the elections of Presidents or Congresses—radiating, begetting appropriate teachers, schools, manners, and, as its grandest result, accomplishing, (what neither the schools nor the churches and their clergy have hitherto accomplish'd, and without which this nation will no more stand, permanently, soundly, than a house will stand without a substratum,) a religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual bases of the States."

A mouthful, to be sure. But Whitman's faith in the larger political uses of literature was justified in an age when sweepingly composed—if only erratically distinguished—works of literature furnished the leading edge of political reform. It was after all, Harriet Beecher Stowe's landmark novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that had galvanized Northern antislavery sentiment at the advent of the war. Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward* spurred the Nationalist Party, one of America's earliest homegrown socialist movements. Years later, Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* famously launched key reform legislation for the meatpacking industry. To reassert Welty's cool distance is to be willfully ignorant of the broader impact of American letters and the course of American political history.

But for all the impact of novels of advocacy, we have consistently failed Whitman's prophecy in one crucial respect. America has almost never produced a serious novel addressing the workings of national politics as its main subject. Indeed, it's hard not to read Whitman's own rueful characterization of his own literary generation—a "parcel of dandies and ennuyées" usually just "whimpering and crying about something, chasing one aborted conceit after another, and forever occupied in dyspeptic amours with dyspeptic women"—and not remember many of the scribes churning out the modern American political novel. The genre is as distress-

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Photograph by GK Hart and Vikki Hart

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ingly flat and uninvolving as it was when "Democratic Vistas" was published.

By the time serious American novelists took up politics as a mature literary theme, the moral perils formerly descried at the borders of frontier life had migrated to a specific set of forbidding institutions—in the specific locale of the nation's capital. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner made this the unmistakable point of the first modern American political novel—and certainly the only one to supply the name of an actual political epoch—*The Gilded Age*. Twain and Warner's 1873 book traces the fortunes of a frontier ingénue named Laura Hawkins who has moved to the heart of D.C. salon society via the wholesome way stations of Missouri and East Tennessee. When legislation before the Senate threatens her father's bequest of Tennessee mining land, Laura is dispatched to Washington. Swept up in the shallow, glittering, scandal-ridden world of Washington power politics, Laura meets with a sad, melodramatic end after being tempted into adultery and murder. Her noble brother Philip, who deems politics "the maddest Vanity Fair one could conceive," turns his back on the process and beats a sylvan retreat to upstate small-town New York and his one true provincial love.

The Gilded Age was successful in its time, and while it has become overshadowed by Twain's more richly imagined works, its legacy can be seen in the genre it established. From *The Gilded Age* on, Washington was to be the premier setting of a strikingly continuous American political fable of innocence at risk. This sturdy tale typically pitches a political naif's fateful interest in the machinery of reform against the backdrop of irredeemably fallen, endlessly seductive relations of power in the nation's capital. If much of America's signature literature remains, in the memorable formulation of R.W.B. Lewis, the saga of the American Adam, Washington is the site of Adam's fall.

If Twain and Warner staked out these themes for the mass reading public, Henry Adams sharpened and refined them for his cultivated East Coast peers in *Democracy*, which he published anonymously in 1880. *Democracy* was subtitled, pointedly, an American novel, and so it was: a prim, yet oddly frank Victorian saga of a young widow, Madeleine Lee, daughter of a famous Philadelphia clergyman, who has determined to make her way in the world of Washington political power after years of leading the half-hearted life of a reformer and society lady in New York. She soon establishes herself as the keeper of one of Washington's more lively and fashionable salons, and is squired about town by the Illinois Sen. Silas Ratcliffe (a.k.a. the "Prairie Giant"), a Washington kingmaker clearly modeled on Chester A. Arthur's legendarily corrupt secretary of state, James G. Blaine: "The beauty of his work consisted in the skill with which he avoided questions of principle," Adams writes in one of the novel's typically prim bursts of moral hauteur.

The novel proceeds along a simple narrative arc: Ratcliffe's courtship of Lee is gradually requited and ripens just as his true nature is exposed in the revelation that he took a major bribe from a trans-Atlantic cable firm. The dour moral of Adams's fable is laid out by a minor character—a European diplomat at one of Mrs. Lee's salons who is (far from incidentally, in Adams's own Yankee patrician moral universe) also a Jew named Baron Jacobi. Discussing the question of political corruption in America, the baron announces "with his wickedest leer":

"I declare to you that in all my experience I have found no society which has had elements of corruption like the United States. The children in the street are corrupt, and know how to cheat me. The cities are all corrupt, and also the towns and the counties and the States' legislatures and the judges. Everywhere men betray trusts both public and private, steal money, run away with public funds. . . . You gentlemen in the Senate very well declare that your great United States, which is the head of the civilized world, can never learn anything from the example of corrupt Europe. You are right—quite right! The great United States needs not an example."

After Madeleine finally rebuffs Ratcliffe's proposal of marriage, the shifty Baron gets the last heavily symbolic gesture. Seeing Ratcliffe on the sidewalk outside the Lee house just after the senator's suit is rejected, Jacobi mocks him with insincere congratulations for the engagement he knows to be broken; and then, when the senator sets upon him in a violent rage, he beats him in the face with his cane. What more gruesome testimony could there be to the depths that American democracy has sunk—to be called out and bested by the likes of a withered, cunning, and morally superior old world soul like Jacobi?

In the century and a quarter since *Democracy*'s publication, remarkably little has changed in the depiction of American political affairs in American literature. Joan Didion offered up her own updated version of Adams's novel in 1984. The book follows a senator's wife, with the heavily symbolic name Inez Victor, who gets enmeshed in a doomed affair with a CIA operative, a reverse-image of the romantic alliance at the heart of Adams's novel. Only in Didion's vision, the seamy side of democracy has become a full-scale global delusion and imperial folly: Victor's affair takes place in Southeast Asia at the time of the fall of Saigon, and is interspersed with dyspeptic flashbacks from earlier U.S. campaign and media appearances, all reinforcing the weightless unreality of a world that is nonetheless

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going definitively to hell.

The arch fastidiousness of Adams and his many literary descendants seems misplaced in one crucial way: The American political system has never really staked anything on the preservation of innocence. Indeed, its structural genius is very much the reverse—using the self-interested agendas of political players to cancel each other out, interlacing the powers of government in order to limit the damage that one branch can do, and making ambition at least address, if not fulfill, the public good in spite of itself. Our federal government, as any good reader of "Federalist 10" can report, is an instrument of cynicism erected on the open acknowledgment that human nature is flawed. It has unfailingly survived (and thrived) despite the vices novelists suggest have brought it to its knees. Expecting anyone to journey to the seat of national power and deliver a Mr. Smith-like blow for the sanctity of scouting and motherhood is a bit like wanting the final act of a musical to be all gun battles and explosions: It's what the critics call a genre error.

What's more, this stubborn moralizing impulse is what makes American political fiction, even today, such watery and unsatisfying literature: It deprives writers of the best material. Don't the intrigues sprouting from our well-known human flaws and excesses ultimately make for more engaging plots and character studies than the falls from grace of a thousand or so Washington ingénus? You can consult any of the scores of wiser, better-written European novels of politics—Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine*, Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Gunter Grass's *Dog Years*, Joseph Roth's *The Spider's Web*, to name but a few—and see how much richer and more nuanced political fiction can be. You can also see the parry-and-thrust of ambition and vice sparking Gore Vidal's better historical fantasias—steeped as they are in a rather perversely relished old world fatalism—such as *Burr*, *Lincoln*, and *1876*.

But most of all, you can see exuberant besotted sinfulness of all varieties on rich display in the one truly great modern American political novel, Billy Lee Brammer's 1961 *The Gay Place*. Unlike most novelistic chroniclers of our politics, who got their first close-up views of politics as either journalists (Klein), political confidants (Adams, Twain, and Warren), or mere consumers of news (Beinhart), Brammer wrote of the political from a true insider's vantage. He had been a press flack and speechwriter for Lyndon Johnson during his illustrious arm-twisting, back-slapping, and deal-making career as Senate majority leader. As such, Brammer described himself as unapologetically "pro-politician"—the sort of literary disclaimer that only seems to be necessary in American letters.

Brammer's inside view helped him, first of all, to bring off a deceptively simple inversion: For him, politicians are not the tempters in the garden of American innocence. They are moral protagonists. As political animals, they're accustomed to honoring few clear distinctions between their messy, conflicted, adulterous, and boozy lives and their obligations to the public weal, and so they are not in the business of sacrificing one for the sake of the other. This means, among other things, that they have few two-dimensional virtues to jeopardize and no melodramatic Victorian corridors of power in which to sully themselves. Brammer's protagonists are all sublimely self-aware adults: They bed each other's spouses and broker parliamentary support with the same bleary-eyed aplomb, and reflect openly about the shabby compromises and disappointments they spring on themselves as they imagine they are doing good.

And presiding above them all is the character clearly modeled on LBJ, Texas governor Arthur Fenstemaker. *The Gay Place* is actually three linked novellas, all set in the bohemian-cum-political capital of Austin of the late 1950s; and what links them is Fenstemaker, who manages to serve as the prime mover of each tale, with the foreknowledge and consent of precious few others. In "Room Enough to Caper," he coaxes an appointed boy senator—whose marriage is on the rocks and who is wracked with grief over what he takes to be his role in the death of his brother—into a reelection bid, by forcing a thuggish McCarthyite opponent on him, and jolting his self-respect back to life in the process. In "Country Pleasures," he engineers a favorable divorce and child custody agreement for a trusted adviser by way of pretending to bed the adviser's actress wife—all on the pasteboard set of the *Giant*-style film set where she's filming her latest movie. And in the book's finest extended tale, "The Flea Circus," Fenstemaker abruptly revives one assemblyman's career as an up-and-coming reform figure while just as abruptly disassembling another's—all in the service of winning passage of an education reform bill benefiting neglected poor and black students from a largely hostile legislature. Indeed, throughout the novel, the governor brings the personal agendas of everyone around him into alignment with a higher good, whether they—and sometimes even he—know it or not.

Fenstemaker is, in short, an anti-Willie Stark or Jack Stanton. Disillusion in so perfectly rounded and self-knowing a scoundrel is thankfully irrelevant. "The first principle," he announces to one of his protégés, "is that you've got to learn to rise above principle." No one in Fenstemaker's vast retinue ever quite manages to disown or chastise him, for they know that, far from defying their high-flown principles of politics, he embodies the possibilities of genuine political action. As Roy Sherwood, the jump-started adulterous reformer of "The Flea Circus" says, Fenstemaker is "Mahatma Gandhi and Rasputin . . . The Prince of Darkness and the Goddamn Mystic Angel. If I ever

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back off from Fenstemaker, it won't be because I lost faith. Just the reverse. Because I might put so much faith in him I'd stop believing in myself."

Fenstemaker represents something else as well: a kind of heroic vitalism rarely found in a culture sapped by the very sort of cheap moralizing that turns up in your average American political novel. "The Flea Circus's" Roy Sherwood again zeroes in on this point as he ponders a pair of truly earnest naifs in his political circle:

"They were all such amateurs, he thought. Risen out of innocence, out of grace passing into awareness and a kind of hollow sophistication with hardly a corrupting experience—a genuinely horrific crime—come in between. And there were parallels. You could trace the wornout course of their piddling derelictions right alongside their politics. It wasn't enough; not enough to break through into awareness and good intentions; not enough, moreover, to stand away and point to how the public and private business ought to be carried on, clucking your distaste and disapproval. It was insufficient—in fact, it was ruinous. He wondered about the Governor. Had he somehow managed to transcend into some blessed state, passed them all, perilously close to the abyss until reaching a point of holy ground from which he could view the whole speckled landscape, viewing it with a tyrannizing emotion? At least he remained operative—old Fenstemaker—he knew what absolutely had to be done; he could engage himself and then withdraw without losing that commanding vision.... The truly able, it appeared, had only so much time to squander on disillusion and self-analysis. Then those destructive vanities were turned round and put to the business of doing what had got to be done. The truly gifted, as opposed to the merely clever, were too busy running things to be bothered. He thought of his cat...battling himself against a mirror."

This half-drunken interior monologue neatly and sparely dispatches the self-serving lie of American political innocence and its many "piddling derelictions." It also, far from incidentally, points toward the sort of redemption that characters like Fenstemaker can achieve even after tasting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and setting up shop as harvesters and fermenters of that fruit. Fenstemaker is a forever unstable compound of means and ends, virtues and sins, righteousness and vanity—no less so than his real-life model, who masterminded both the Gulf of Tonkin resolution and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts.

But he's also, like any such tortured literary character from Ahab to Winston Smith, hostage to his own saving plan of action—that "commanding vision" allowing him to arrange and disarrange events according to his own holy ground "perilously close to the abyss." The genius of Brammer's novel is its willingness to wrestle openly with the implications of a tragic, divided political nature—not merely for stars of first magnitude like Fenstemaker but also for the many lesser political beings in his orbit, falling so continuously short of the glory. True knowledge of sin, after all—not the lurid self-dramatizing Robert Penn Warren kind—is the original force that sparked the original halting Puritan dalliances with formal democracy on the North American continent. Under that dispensation, everyone is an imperfect vessel of the people's will—most especially those anointed its official servants. In this scheme of things, politics is, quite literally, Fenstemaker's saving grace, and his often brutal and cunning course through Brammer's novel charts a very American, though thankfully illusion-free, pilgrim's progress. Such is the stuff of great literature—and, indeed, of reasonably good politics.

Whitman emphatically agreed. Toward the end of "Democratic Vistas," he urged the nation's young men never to scorn the stuff of political engagement, however unseemly it appeared under the grotesquely corrupt husbandry of the Grant administration:

"It is the fashion among dillettants and fops (perhaps I myself am not guiltless,) to decry the whole formulation of the active politics of America, as beyond redemption, and to be carefully kept away from. See you that you do not fall into this error. America, it may be, is doing very well upon the whole, notwithstanding these antics of the parties and their leaders, these half-brain'd nominees, the many ignorant ballots, and many elected failures and blatherers. It is the dillettants, and all who shirk their duty, who are not doing well. As for you, I advise you to enter more strongly yet into politics. I advise every young man to do so."

Whitman was anything but pie-eyed about American politics, as befits a former Grant administration appointee who had been abruptly discharged when he was discovered to be the author of the "immoral" *Leaves of Grass*. He wrote candidly about what he confessed was the "appalling prospect" of a less-than-informed universal suffrage; he also wrote of the grim watches he endured as a nurse to military casualties on both sides of the Civil War. But he was also a sufficiently sharp-eyed writer to see through the vapid pose of unearned political disillusion, and to savor the genuine imaginative promise of American democracy. One certainly can't read Whitman's impatient litany of political failings and think that all that much has changed in the temper of our politics. Likewise for the prospect of the nation "doing very well" in spite of said temper. So let the dilettantes and fops of our own grimly diminished literature, besotted with its fashionable gestures of despair, reflexive irony, and terminal purism, take heed. In pursuing their own reveries of unsullied detachment from the political fray, they're acting much like Roy Sherwood's cat, ardently doing battle with half-comprehended superficial impressions of the world, and bumping up against its own reflection. ◆

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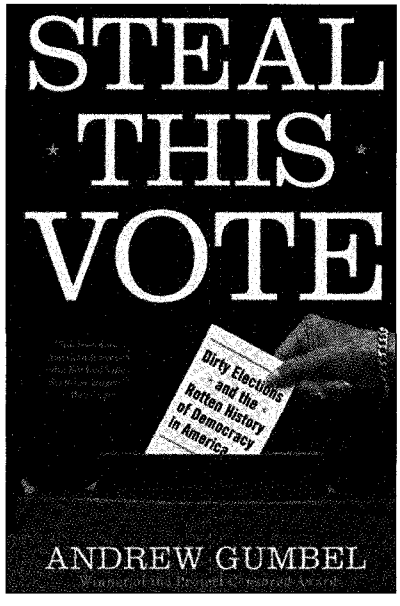
Early and Often

How to avoid butterfly ballots, long lines, and pregnant chads.

By Phil Keisling

Every Election Day brings a few constants: long lines, last-minute campaigning, and complaints by both political parties that the other is trying to steal the race. The nature of these accusations breaks down along party lines. Republicans whisper that Democrats are plotting to manufacture wins through fraud; meanwhile, Democrats warn that Republicans are intimidating voters and using other nefarious means to suppress votes. The charges have only heated up since 2000, when the contested presidential election gave the country an illuminating and disturbing peek behind the curtain of our electoral system.

With the average seventh-grader at least familiar with the term "pregnant chads," election reform is no longer the province of secretaries of state or the occasional academic conference. The issues of how voters are qualified, and how ballots are cast and counted, have received far more public scrutiny in the past half-decade than they did during the previous half-century. And yet the lack of one uniform election system—each state, county, and locality has different rules about how it conducts elections—means that there are literally thousands of voting systems to understand, making it even more difficult to evaluate accusations about failures to protect against voting fraud and suppression.



Steal This Vote: Dirty Elections and the Rotten History of Democracy in America
By Andrew Gumbel
Nation Books; $15.95

Into this maze of rules and procedures comes Andrew Gumbel's *Steal This Vote*, a comprehensive and readable exploration of the American election process. Gumbel, a U.S.-based correspondent for the *Independent* of London, has taken the time to visit the county courthouses and elections offices where ballots are actually collected and counted, and he supplements his observations with historical tales of electoral scandal. These include Lyndon Johnson's 1948 Senate election, in which the infamous Ballot Box 13 contained the names of 200 voters, all of whom appeared to have voted after the polls closed, in precise alphabetical order. Joining that ignoble page in American history is the Hayes-Tilden presidential election of 1876—Rutherford Hayes lost the popular vote but ultimately triumphed over Samuel Tilden in the Electoral College by a margin of 185 to 184. (The late William Rehnquist, whose Supreme Court opinion installed George W. Bush as president, published a book in 2004 that vigorously praised and defended both the process and the outcome of the 1876 election—a decidedly minority view.)

Gumbel is a breezy, confident writer who takes his subject seriously. So it is frustrating to arrive at the end of his book—after he has docu-

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mented the various flaws in our electoral system and the many possibilities for fraud and vote suppression—only to have him throw up his hands in despair. To hear Gumbel tell it, the United States is doomed to resort to a sort of arms race, a system of mutual deterrence between the two parties, with dueling lawyers and other election observers dispatched to every precinct around the country to prevent wrongdoing. It's a bleak conclusion. Fortunately for the rest of us, it's also an unnecessary one.

When most of us hear the word "steal" in the context of an election, we think of ballot-box-stuffing or the machinations of Tammany Hall figures. In *Steal This Vote*, Gumbel defines "stealing" as a broad, malleable concept that even extends to strategies aimed at influencing voter beliefs and behavior. There are negative campaign tactics geared toward changing voters' minds about a candidate, underhanded efforts to prevent voting by leafleting poor neighborhoods with "informational fliers" that tell residents where to go to vote...on Wednesday, and logistical obstacles, such as poorly functioning equipment or under-equipped polling facilities that lead to untenably long lines in some urban locations.

Perhaps the most notorious voter suppression tactic is perfectly legal: Six states, including Florida, bar ex-felons who have served their sentences from voting for the rest of their lives. In many cases—including the 2000 election debacle—this injustice is compounded by bureaucratic incompetence; the "can't vote" file for Florida in 2000 contained a staggering number of errors and inaccurately banned names.

In fact, while Gumbel complains equally about voter fraud and suppression, a close inspection of his many anecdotes reveals few consequential and proven examples of fraud since the 1960 presidential election. (Gumbel notes that Nixon was convinced he'd lost Illinois due to Mayor Daley's shenanigans on Kennedy's behalf, but he decided to forego a recount in part because of his own partisans' grubby hands.) After that election, the now-infamous "Votomatic" punch-card system swept the country. Though it will soon be consigned to the scrap heap of electoral history, the Votomatic really was a huge step forward, replacing the far more easily manipulated paper ballots. Gumbel's wistful, even affectionate, portrayal of the Votomatic's rise and demise is one of the book's most interesting chapters.

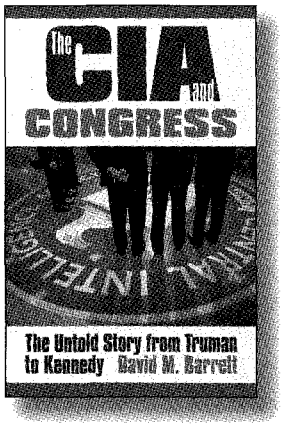
What Gumbel misses in the midst of his reverie, however, is that while fraud is a pretty rare, exotic, and highly localized species, various voter suppression techniques are far more common in the modern political ecosystem. And the impact is hardly neutral. Republican operatives have long understood that elections tend to go better when voting rates are low, particularly in urban, predominantly minority precincts. Even so, the plain low-down tactics—like the phony fliers—are far less common than logistical ones. Forcing people to vote on a work day, often when the weather is bad, and at polling stations where equipment often malfunctions, can be barriers that suppress as much—if not more than—the more blatant examples of partisan dirty tricks.

Because he presents fraud and suppression as if they occur in equal measure and to equal effect, Gumbel isn't able to provide a clear sense of why the two parties might respond differently to solutions for our voting troubles. Nor can he explain to us why it's important to find a voting system that significantly decreases the opportunities for voter suppression.

The CIA and Congress

The Untold Story from Truman to Kennedy

David M. Barrett



"Barrett reveals a CIA that made its own rules, wrote its own budget, classified its own secrets, and persuaded the Congress to like it. A rich and fabulous story that sheds new light on just about every significant episode in the first decades of the Cold War and confirms what many have long suspected—secrecy is the great enemy of democracy, and vice versa."—**Thomas Powers**, author of *Intelligence Wars: American Secret History from Hitler to Al-Qaeda*

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Of the many voting systems in use today, Gumbel devotes much of his attention to Direct Recording Election devices (DREs), the latest high-tech panacea. Some of his best original reporting zeroes in on the frenzied embrace of these DRE touch-screen voting machines, despite their many hiccups, flaws, and limitations. Virtually unknown in the 2000 election, DREs were the means by which tens of millions of voters cast their ballots in 2004.

The promise of DREs is enticing. The machines are similar to ATMs—ballot options appear on the screen, voters select (and then confirm) their choices, and then they submit their ballots, clearing the screen for the next voter. With DREs, there is no need to print tens of millions of ballots, much less discard millions of unused ones after the election. There is no waiting hours after the polls close to obtain election results. And there are no more physical ballots to sift through in the event of a recount.

But therein lies the rub. If election officials cannot perform a manual recount of ballots—if they have to rely on software and bits of digital data to "recount" votes—there will always be less than 100 percent certainty about the results. Even DREs that can produce paper trails—an expensive, but almost no-brainer modification that was recently urged by a national commission chaired by former president Jimmy Carter and former secretary of state James Baker—still fall short of the level of assurance that derives when election officials can literally put their hands on the very ballot marked by each voter.

That's a problem because the balance we aim for while constructing and managing an election system is how to minimize bureaucratic rules and barriers that hinder the right to vote while also including sufficient safeguards to ensure integrity and credibility in our elections. However disappointed voters might personally be with a particular electoral result, we want them to trust the numbers and move on.

Despite Gumbel's provocative title and thesis, he documents far less outright fraud than he does an unrelenting parade of petty malfeasance, bureaucratic incompetence, and rank stupidity. Theresa LePore, the miserably incapable Palm Beach County elections supervisor, is a prime example. Her infamous "butterfly ballot"—designed, Gumbel notes deliciously, ostensibly to help elderly, mostly Democratic voters by enlarging the type-size of candidate names—likely deprived Al Gore of more than 2,000 votes, and, hence, the presidency. This was no result of fraud, however. LePore, you will remember, was a Democrat.

If at the end of the day our problems really could be traced back to incompetence at every level of the voting system, it would indeed be tempting to give up and declare the situation an unsolvable mess. As Gumbel rightly notes, throughout American history we have lacked not only national standards for running elections, but statewide standards as well. As a result, we have left the functioning of elections to tens of thousands of local (usually county level) officials. Are some of these malcontents, cronies, and even outright crooks, often put and kept in place more for their partisan loyalty than their proven competence and objectivity? Absolutely. But while Katherine Harris and Theresa LePore make for good stories, they are far from representative of our country's election officials.

All of this means that our best options lie not in pruning the ranks of election officials or in spending millions of dollars on machines that may make recounts impossible or in constructing elaborate systems to prevent fraud that does not take place, but in making the act of voting easier for the greatest number of people.

The challenges Gumbel details do indeed make voting very difficult, especially for voters in a specific demographic—and they can even affect the results of an election. Given these high stakes, Gumbel might have been expected to explore every possible alternative to the DREs and punch-card machines that dominate current elections. And yet he flits right by an elegant, deceptively simple, and proven reform that would best ensure exactly the kind of elections he promotes: vote by mail.

During the eight years in which I served as Secretary of State in Oregon, our state adopted the vote-by-mail (VBM) system, a reform that is as familiar as it is revolutionary. In the more than 200 years of conducting elections in this country, and through numerous technological innovations, the basic business model of voting has remained unchanged. To exercise his or her right to vote, the voter must go to where government authorities have the ballots. VBM reverses this premise. Ballots are sent to every registered voter approximately two weeks prior to the election. It's then up to the voter to get the ballot back to the government.

Anyone who has ever voted absentee is familiar with the idea. Voters fill out their ballots on their own time, researching candidates or ballot initiatives if they want, and then return the ballot either through the mail or by taking it to a convenient drop-off site. Completed ballots are inserted into an inner "secrecy envelope," which is sealed, and then placed into an outer envelope, which is signed.

The VBM system addresses nearly every concern about vote fraud, suppression, and even simple inconvenience. The results have been stunning. In the 2004 presidential election, a full 85 percent of Oregon's registered voters cast ballots; even for lower-profile elections—school bond elections and primaries—turnout is typically twice, or even higher, that of most other states.

The cost of elections plummets when states use VBM, with no need to spend millions of dollars purchasing or repairing voting equipment. Perhaps most importantly, the integrity of ballots is greater in the VBM system because every voter signature is verified before the ballots

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are even tallied. This one change alone makes a VBM election significantly more secure than any polling place election in America.

Put bluntly, VBM seems to be a compelling solution to virtually every one of Gumbel's concerns. Yet he mentions it only once, on page 221, in a disparaging aside that references a made-up statistic of 36,000 allegedly suspect votes in 2000 (unsourced, to boot). By such sleight of hand, he quickly dismisses its usefulness before returning to his familiar chorus of bemoaning almost everything about the state of American electoral affairs.

Ultimately, Gumbel does us the service of highlighting the myriad shortcomings of our voting system, and puncturing our self-righteousness by noting how abysmally short we fall of the standards our elections observers attempt to impose on other countries. But when it comes to proposing the best way to balance our competing values of ballot access and ballot integrity, Gumbel punts. The book's penultimate sentence reads: "If they [the Democratic and Republican parties] want to stack, rig, or steal an election, and they have the means and the infrastructural control necessary to pull it off, they will almost certainly do so, whatever rules are in place."

Nonsense. His own book illustrates that elections are far more likely to be secure and aboveboard today than at any other time in American history; systemic election fraud is a rare exception, hardly the rule. And while it's true that efforts to suppress votes abound, there is no evidence that they are more prevalent (much less more effective) than in the past. Besides, even if fraud and suppression were on the rise, a voting system exists that could deal with those issues and render them largely moot. In such an entertaining and well-reported book, the only shame is that Gumbel wasn't willing to think about solutions in addition to the problem.

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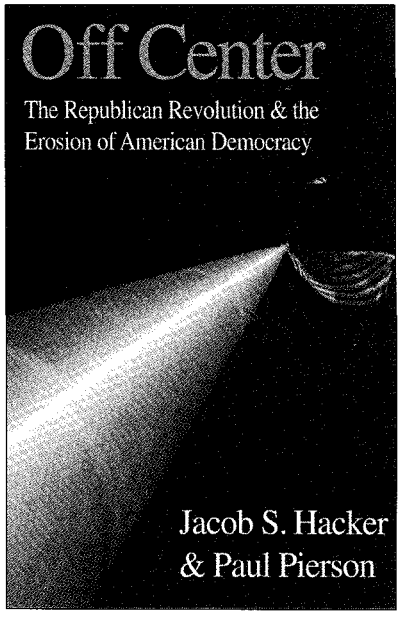
No Right Turn

If Americans haven't gotten more conservative, why is the GOP in charge?

By Christopher Hayes

John Kerry had just barely conceded, and Democrats were still wiping away their tears, when on Nov. 4 of last year *The New York Times* ran an analysis that argued it was "impossible to read President Bush's re-election with larger Republican majorities in both houses of Congress as anything other than the clearest confirmation yet that this is a center-right country." The pronouncement seemed uncontroversial, and it reflected the view held by many that Bush's victory was the culmination of a thirty-year swing to the right among the American electorate. Over the last three decades, the base of the Republican Party has veered sharply to the right, with incoming congressmen and senators increasingly far more conservative than the incumbents they replace. Even the Democratic base has moved to the right: An analysis of survey data reveals its own activists are now closer to the views of independent voters than they were 10 years ago. It would seem reasonable to assume that the center of American public opinion has moved in tandem with the government.

Yet, as political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson argue convincingly in *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*, there are scant public opinion data to suggest that is so. They cite political scientist James Stimson, who's been recording the "national mood" through a survey of over 200 questions for over two decades and finds Americans no more conservative today than they were in 1972. National Election Survey data reveals that Americans are less likely than they



Off Center: The Republican Revolution & the Erosion of American Democracy
By Jacob S. Hacker & Paul Pierson
Yale University Press; $25.00

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were in the '70s to say that the government is "too powerful," and the percentages of the electorate that identify as liberal and conservative respectively have remained unchanged for nearly three decades. "It is striking," they write, "that across all of the major left-right issues, one is hard pressed to find any evidence that Americans are markedly more conservative today than they were in the recent (and even relatively distant) past."

So what gives? That, of course, is the big question occupying progressive writers, academics, and public intellectuals of all stripes, and if *Off Center*'s answers aren't entirely novel, the book's detail, specificity, and comprehensiveness make it a vital contribution. Two key trends are at work according to Hacker and Pierson: the growing numerical and financial strength of the Republican base and the GOP's refinement of a variety of tactical gambits—unified mostly by their reliance on subterfuge—to subvert the normal mechanisms that prevent majority coalitions from pushing through a radical agenda. All of this combines to produce "a systematic weakening of the institutional bonds that connect ordinary voters with elected politicians to ensure that American politics remains on center."

One standard view of the American constitutional system is that its checks, balances, diffuse power, and obstacles at every turn invest the most power in those closest to the center of the political spectrum: the independent voters and centrist legislators who can tip the scales in favor of a candidate or piece of legislation. According to this view, when the "the public and the base conflict," Hacker and Pierson write, "the public wins." But in the last several decades, the economic base of the GOP—the top fifth of income earners (which vote for and contribute overwhelmingly to the GOP)—has become far wealthier and far more politically involved than it once was. At the same time, the migration of the South into the Republican column has removed what was once a kind of centrist anchor. Southern politicians were generally extreme, even viciously conservative on social issues, but often downright liberal on economics; when Barry Goldwater floated the idea of privatizing the Tennessee Valley Authority, Southern supporters rushed to denounce the idea. The conversion of Southern conservative Democrats into free-market crusaders and Republican partisans has created such a large conservative base that Karl Rove and Tom DeLay need to poach only a relatively small number of independents and moderates in order to win elections or pass legislation.

If there's a wicked genius in the GOP strategy, it's in understanding that they can get enough of these moderate votes without actually moderating the content of their policies. Take the first set of tax cuts pushed through by the GOP in 2001—even before, the authors note, the president gained the political capital of a wartime leader. At the time, dozens of polls showed that tax cuts were simply not a priority of the American public. As Bush was sworn in, just 5 percent of voters polled said that taxes were the nation's "most important problem," and when given a choice between spending on programs like Social Security and Medicare or tax cuts, tax cuts garnered support from barely a quarter of those polled. The administration knew all this full well. Treasury official Michele Davis wrote in a memo to then-secretary Paul O'Neill (reprinted in the book): "The public prefers spending on things like health care and education over cutting taxes."

Here, then, was the first time the administration was faced with the fundamental obstacle to implementing the Gilded Age governing vision of its benefactors and leaders: The policies that would enrich its wealthy base were not those the general public wanted. But the Bush administration understood something profound about public opinion, something Hacker and Pierson only implicitly allude to but don't quite seem to grasp. Polls might be the best way of figuring out the public's stance on a wide variety of issues, but insofar as they carve the world into issue categories, they build in a way of thinking about politics that isn't necessarily reflective of what motivates people when they actually cast their ballots. If you ask the public if the growing deficit is a problem, they say "yes" overwhelmingly, but in the words of one Bush aide "Name me one person who has lost an election because of the deficit." In other words: It doesn't matter what people think about issues, it only matters what they vote on. In this respect, Bush is telling the truth when he says he doesn't listen to the polls. He realizes that on a whole host of issues, he doesn't have to.

And the tax cuts are another perfect example. Tax cuts are a kind of political junk food. If you ask Americans if they want them, they may say no, but when they're actually right there in front of the voter on the plate, they're hard to resist. Instead of choosing between its wealthy paymasters and the public at large, the GOP figured out a way to have their tax cuts and eat them, too. They just had to muddy the waters long enough to get them passed. So they lied about both the intentions and the effects of the policy—Davis told O'Neill it was "crucial that your remarks make clear that there is no trade-off" between the tax cuts and spending on other programs. And more insidiously, they structured the cuts themselves in such a way as to hide their intent and effect. Republicans front-loaded the few benefits there were for the middle class while slowly phasing in the porcine payoffs for the uber wealthy. And they inserted sunset provisions to reduce the putative cost of the tax cuts despite the fact they knew they'd be able to browbeat enough legislators

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into making the cuts permanent. Once it was all done, despite the outcries from progressive critics, the public simply shrugged it off.

The process that produced the 2001 tax cuts has been repeated *ad nauseum* in the years that have followed, resulting in—just to name a few—three additional successive tax cuts, the Patriot Act rammed through under the cover of night, and the Medicare boondoggle. In all these cases, the problem, Hacker and Pierson argue, is not that policies are complex but rather that the policy features "are designed to hide what policies are really doing while deliberately restricting the scope for future democratic choice." To those who have been following politics for the last several years, this is nothing new. But the authors do a fine job of documenting the extent to which the GOP, rather than using its political power to create policies, uses its policies to advance its political agenda.

It would be naïve to assert that this is entirely novel: All effective politicians use policies for political purposes. But Hacker and Pierson point out just how totally the aims of governance have been subsumed in the aims of furthering GOP hegemony. John DiIulio, who directed the White House's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, and whose critiques are heavily cited in the book, pointed out in a 2002 letter to journalist Ron Suskind that the total domination of politics over policy in the Bush White House is completely unprecedented: "In eight months, I heard many, many staff discussions, but not three meaningful, substantive policy discussions...the lack of even basic policy knowledge, and the only casual interest in knowing more, was somewhat breathtaking."

What DiIulio describes is the inner workings of a classic political machine, the guiding ethos of which, in the legendary phrasing of Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, makes no distinction between politics and policy. "Good politics is good government," Hizzoner used to say, "and good government is good politics." The Rove/DeLay/Norquist machine, in this respect, is no different than its predecessors. It seeks what all machines seek: to discredit, manipulate, intimidate, or marginalize any source of power outside the machine itself.

The second half of *Off Center* describes in detail how the "Republican Machine" works, how it rewards friends and punishes enemies, and how it has neutered or annihilated the moderates in its midst. Broken up into clear subsections with apt coinages like "backlash insurance"—the ways party leaders protect legislators from constituent disgust with the party's radical direction—Hacker and Pierson lay out in sober detail the various ruses the "New Power Brokers" employ: robbing committee chairs of their independence by instituting term limits, using the House Rules Committee (which has nine Republicans and four Democrats) to quietly kill threatening amendments, utilizing obscure administrative rules to institute broad policy changes, holding floor votes open while arms are twisted to pass legislation, shutting Democrats out of conference committees where corporate pork can be larded onto already-passed legislation away from the minority party's prying eyes, tightly coordinating different factions of the right, and—as Nicholas Confessore first reported in these pages—bullying lobbying firms into hiring only Republicans.

Most pernicious are the "time-bombs" GOP lawmakers insert into legislation, whereby they intentionally ignore or exacerbate emerging policy problems, such as the Alternative Minimum Tax, with the hope of creating future crises that can serve as cover for further radical measures.

As lurid as the details are, one can't help but ask: Why didn't previous majorities do this sort of thing? Tip O'Neill was a smart guy. Why didn't he provide his members with "backlash insurance," or change the Ethics Committee rules so that the majority party could single-handedly stop an investigation? While *Off Center* never explicitly addresses this question, the implicit answer is a simple as it is disturbing. Much of what kept prior governing coalitions in check were informal, generally agreed-upon norms rather than black-letter law or immutable rules. Consider that for years state legislatures have, as a matter of custom, redistricted congressional districts only every 10 years, following new census data. There was nothing stopping a majority party from engineering a mid-decade redistricting for its own partisan advantage other than a generalized sense it would be cheating to do so. Such considerations mean little to Tom DeLay and Karl Rove.

The picture of the GOP's leadership that emerges from *Off Center* resembles nothing so much as Louis XIV, who was able to consolidate power in the French monarchy by recognizing that much of what limited the king's political power were ultimately social and cultural norms, norms which Louis ingeniously undermined. He was, in short, an innovator, a power entrepreneur who recognized that the "rules" that kept the king in check could be subverted and altered, and that the fractured nature of the aristocracy could be leveraged and manipulated to his advantage.

But there's a structural aspect to the GOP's dominance as well. Machines thrive on a dearth of information, which is why they are so effective in electing "downticket" candidates. You may be able to make up your mind about who you want to vote for mayor, but when it comes to the 12 names on the ballot for Water Reclamation District or circuit judge, you're likely to pull the lever for whomever's on the palm card your precinct captain slipped you because that's simply

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the only thing you have to go on. In Washington today, it is the information "haves"—most notably corporate America and interest groups on both sides—who hold policy makers to account, while the information "have nots"—the majority of the American populace—have literally no idea what the hell is even going on. The GOP's repeated and brazen give-aways to the powerful, the connected, and the super-rich are like crimes committed in broad daylight in front of a blindfolded crowd.

The blame for this can't all be laid at Tom DeLay's feet. If there's a gap in Hacker and Pierson's account it is the glancing treatment they give to the parallel stories of how oppositional forces such as labor unions, the press, and most obviously the Democratic Party have either withered or failed to hold the machine accountable. The GOP didn't rise to power in a vacuum, and despite the body blows the party has landed to the mechanism of self-governance, the nation remains a democracy in which citizens choose between alternatives by means of elections. If people are voting for a party with which they fundamentally disagree on a whole host of issues, then the opposition party has more than a little bit to do with that.

While some of the reforms Hacker and Pierson propose in the book's final chapter are no doubt warranted, the first step in any structural reform is to pry the machine's fingers off the steering wheel of power. In this case, the destruction of the GOP monopoly and the restoration of accountable governance fall to progressives, liberals, moderates, and a whole host of other coalition members in the big dysfunctional tent that is the Democratic Party. We had better get our act together soon because as *Off Center* suggests, the longer a machine stays in power, the harder it is to beat.

Christopher Hayes is a senior editor of *In These Times.*

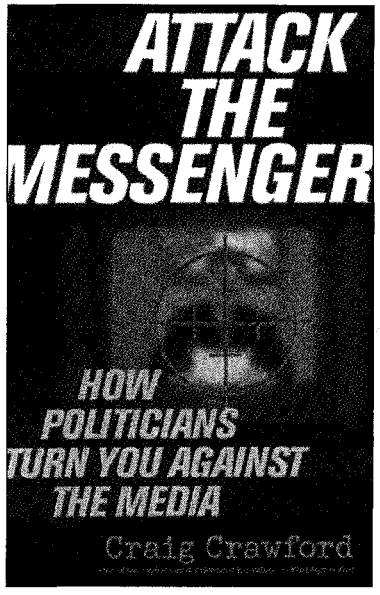
The Elephant in the Room

Craig Crawford takes aim at the war against the media but missed the biggest target.

By Margaret Sullivan

From Middle America's point of view, the conflict between the media and politicians is like a vicious dogfight with a mangy pit bull on one side and a snarling Doberman on the other. The average person's assessment might be this: a pox on both their kennels.

But Craig Crawford begs to disagree with any such dismissiveness. A columnist for *Congressional Quarterly* and a familiar TV talking head, Crawford has gone a few rounds in the ring himself. In his first book, *Attack the Messenger*, he makes the case that every American should be concerned about the eviscerated state of the press following the fabrication/plagiarism scandals at top newspapers, the Dan Rather debacle at CBS, and the government's latest attacks on journalists and their confidential sources. (He might have a slightly different view in this post-Katrina era, given that the press has raised its bloodied head off the mat, at least momentarily.) As he sees it, the victory of politicians over the press is not only clear, but also deeply alarming. American democracy, Crawford argues, depends on a viable press: one that not only aggressively pursues the truth, but is also believed and trusted by the public.



Attack the Messenger: How Politicians Turn You Against the Media
By Craig Crawford
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, $22.95

Politicians have triumphed in recent years, Crawford goes on, by turning the tables on the traditional questioners and attackers and making the foibles of journalists into the issue, thereby deflecting any blame that might fall upon

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themselves. Their weapon of choice? The public's growing distrust of the media, wielded like a cudgel.

Crawford has taken on a worthy subject here—and a big one. The problem is, he's written a small book. Not just in size, though the volume is nearly as thin as Michael Brown's list of disaster relief credentials, but also in vision, and, most of all, in depth. This dashed-off treatment seems more like the overblown draft of a long magazine piece than a fully realized book. But a book it was to be, and toward that end, the 160 pages of *Attack the Messenger* are padded—none-too-subtly—with such things as the nasty emails Crawford has received from readers and an off-the-point chapter on how news consumers can go about getting the "real story" from media sources.

Worse, Crawford delivers familiar ideas as if they were profound discoveries. "The major news organizations are under siege," he says breathlessly, "[t]hey've been replaced by an agenda-driven rabble of pseudo-journalists on the Web and on cable news networks." He explains, as if to a not-very-bright junior high class, that the public's trust in mainstream news sources—taken for granted in the glory days of Walter Cronkite or the Pentagon Papers-era *New York Times*—is no more: "The role of the news media as an honest broker is shattered. Instead, [people] are drawn to sources that tell them what they want to hear." Those who care about the subject—academics, media people, politicians, government types, and the blogerati—have talked, written, and read about all this *ad nausuem*. A less plugged-in general public, for whom this book seems to be written ("how politicians turn YOU against the media"), may never care. That leaves *Attack the Messenger* without an obvious audience. That's a marketing problem at the very least.

Still, Crawford often writes engagingly and has his moments of perceptiveness and clarity. In a clever-enough device, he identifies some key battles in this war—the Gettysburgs and Antietams of the raging conflict. There was, for example, "the day the politicians began to win the war against the media." That was Jan. 25, 1988, when Dan Rather's efforts to pin down Vice President George H.W. Bush on Iran-Contra backfired. Bush successfully attacked the messenger with a pointed reference to Rather's controversial walk off the anchor desk the year before. Bush emerged triumphant; Rather was cowed.

Years later, there was "the day the politicians won the war against the media," or in Crawford's well-turned phrase, "the day they drove old media down." It was Nov. 23, 2004, when Dan Rather, his reputation wounded by the network's flawed report on President Bush's National Guard service, announced his reluctant resignation.

In each battle, Crawford argues, the media lost ground because it had no effective way of defending itself against the aggressive attacks of politicians and partisan groups. The press simply got pummeled and seemed to have no choice but to take the hits. In the National Guard dust-up, the Bush campaign turned the tables on CBS—making Dan Rather the issue while Republican partisans attacked John Kerry for his Swift Boat experience in Vietnam. It all amounted to what Crawford calls "a miraculous feat of political jujitsu. The candidate who had avoided conflict during Vietnam benefits from attacks on the credibility of the combat veteran in the race."

Amidst all this, problems of logic emerge. Crawford writes constantly about "politicians," but is this generality what he really means, or is it a euphemism for "conservative Republicans and their echo chamber"? Many of his examples include one Bush president or the other, especially the current one. In an unusual case in which he uses an example from the other side of the aisle, it seems a strain. He describes as a milestone event in the taming of the press the day when a president blatantly lied to the public while the press let him get away with it. That was Jan. 26, 1998, when Bill Clinton made his infamous "I did not have sex with that woman" statement about Monica Lewinsky from the Oval Office. But did Clinton really get away with his lie? Not only did the media, in the weeks and months that followed, gleefully lay out every detail of Clinton's extramarital escapades for a drooling, though disapproving, public, but in addition, there *was* that little matter of the president's impeachment. The Clinton example seems included here for political balance rather than because it fits Crawford's premise terribly well.

One wonders: If Crawford means to talk about conservative Republicans when he talks about politicians, why doesn't he just say so? Ah, there's the rub. Doing so would give weight to the apparently terrifying charge of liberal media bias. While Crawford never adequately explores this issue, it's the elephant (an appropriate-enough symbol) in the room. He harps on the idea that the mainstream media can't defend itself, but he never fully nails down the reasons, other than to blame the wicked expertness with which "politicians" spin the facts.

Another reason—a more complicated one—is on display right here in Crawford's writing. The mainstream media can't, or won't, defend itself against raging Rovism—the politically astute ability to turn the tables and "attack the messenger"—precisely because it's so afraid of not seeming completely objective: down the middle, fair to all, taking no sides. That's a nastily effective trap, of course. Crawford not only fails to identify the trap, but tumbles into it, quite fatally, in his own book on the very subject.

Margaret Sullivan is editor-in-chief of *The Buffalo News*.

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Let There Be Light

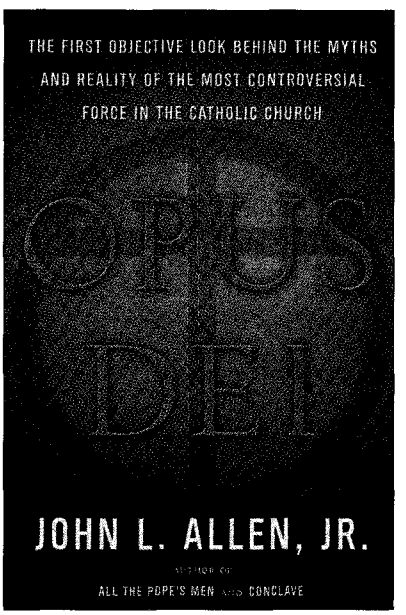
A look inside the hidden world of Opus Dei.

By Paul Baumann

Some know it as the diabolical secret organization of monk-assassins depicted in the *The Da Vinci Code*. Others recall it in vague connection with Robert Hanssen, the FBI agent who spied for Russia. Those inside the Beltway may be familiar with the role it played in the conversion to Catholicism of Sen. Sam Brownback, Robert Bork, and syndicated columnist Robert Novak—though apparently none of them numbers himself among the roughly 3,000 members the group claims to have in the United States. (Nor, despite rumors, do Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, former FBI director Louis Freeh, or Sen. Rick Santorum.)

Opus Dei has unquestionably gotten a lot of bad press, originally because of the prominence of some members in Franco's cabinet toward the end of his regime. But the group has also been accused of, among other things, obsessive secrecy, an authoritarian ethos, being in cahoots with right-wing forces in Latin America, accumulating an indecent amount of wealth, and brainwashing its members. The organization denies all these allegations.

Whether Opus Dei's adepts ultimately strike one as saintly is, as John Allen might say, "a matter of interpretation." Allen, the Vatican correspondent for the liberal National Catholic Reporter, a contributor to CNN and National Public Radio, and most recently author of *Opus Dei: The First Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church*, has earned a reputation for balanced, informed reporting. He does not simply reflect the leanings of the liberal weekly paper that is his primary outlet. Here, that reputation gives credence to much of what Opus Dei members tell him in defending the group's philosophy and practices. In that sense, Allen may be too liberal for his own good.



Opus Dei:
The First Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church
John L. Allen, Jr.

Doubleday Religion; $24.95

What is Opus Dei? First, it is not the nefarious secret society portrayed in *The Da Vinci Code*. It is a mostly lay group of both men and women devoted to spiritual excellence, although several thousand priests belong. The movement was founded in Madrid in 1928 by Josemaria Escriva (1902-75), a charismatic Spanish priest whose 1939 book, *The Way*, is considered a spiritual classic by his devoted followers. From the beginning, Escriva targeted top students at universities, and Opus Dei (which means "the work of God") soon acquired a reputation for elitism. (Today, there are 15 Opus Dei universities, including some of the finest in Spain.) Escriva claimed that God revealed to him the way for ordinary people to become saints, not by renouncing the world, but by excelling in it. The group purports to school members in spiritual practices that enable them to sanctify their lives and their secular work. In being the best laundress or surgeon or lawyer you can be, you are doing God's work, not just pursuing worldly goals. Opus Dei's avid proponents believe that shirt collars are more diligently laundered in Peru, and toilets more faithfully scrubbed in Indiana because of the difference the conservative religious organization makes in the lives of its 85,000 adherents worldwide.

Idealism should not be discounted as the secret of the movement's appeal. Aspirants join because they have discovered a religious vocation: They want to become saints. As a Catholic organization, Opus Dei is somewhat anomalous. In many ways, it is structured like a religious order (such as the Jesuits or Franciscans), and it is led by clerics. Like those in religious orders, members take a vow of obedience, which Opus Dei calls a "contract." Much of the group's spiritual discipline—including daily Mass and prayer, regular instruction from a spiritual "director," weekly confession, and, for some, "mortifications" (self-flagellation)—evokes the stringency common in religious orders

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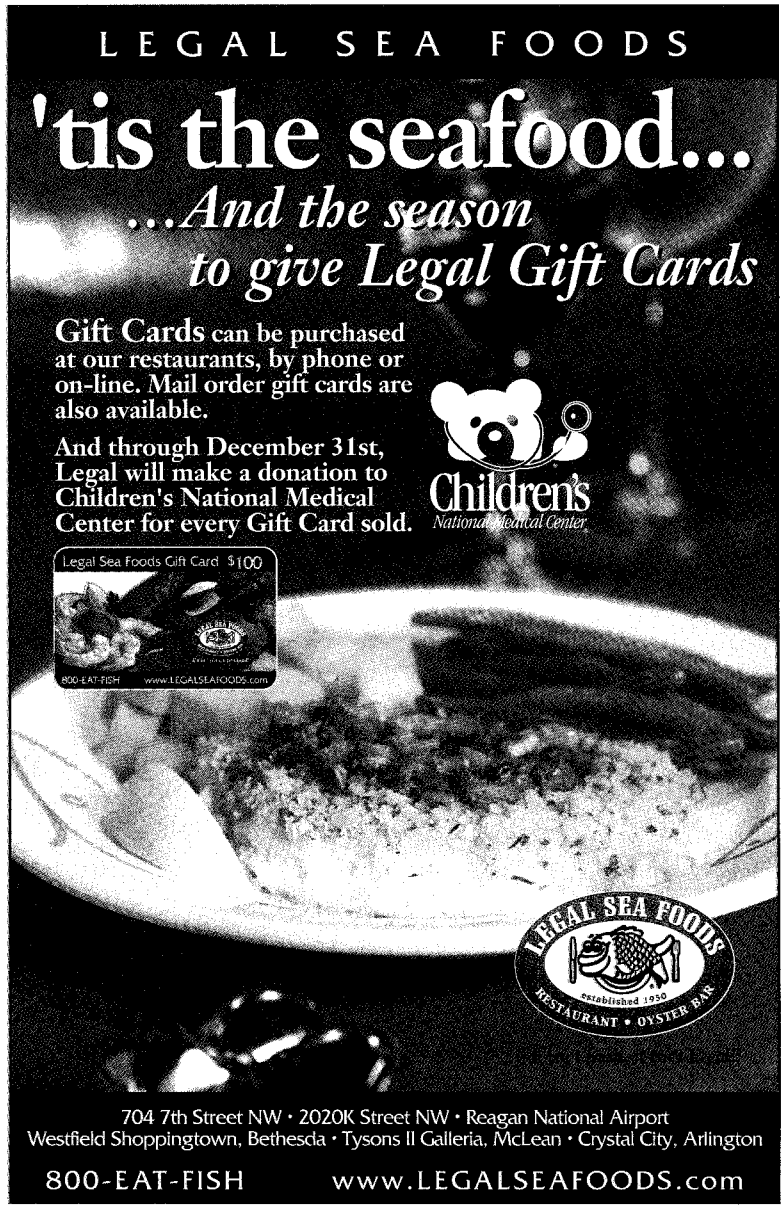
before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). And like priests and women religious, Opus Dei's core adherents, who are called "numeraries" and number roughly 16,000, are celibates who live segregated by gender in Opus Dei residences. At the same time, however, the group thinks of itself as a lay movement—most of its members, whether celibate or not, are not ordained and continue to pursue secular occupations—and the movement criticizes the "clericalism" of Catholics who expect the clergy to do the heavy spiritual lifting for them. Opus Dei claims to have anticipated the Second Vatican Council's "universal call to holiness," a dramatic shift away from the Church's historical emphasis on the superior spiritual dignity of the ordained priest in contrast to that of the layperson. Yet skeptics argue that the group, whose piety and theology are very traditional (celibacy is rarely a secular vocation), operates like a sectarian movement, or even a cult, and has set itself up, with the connivance of the Vatican, as a "church within the Church."

Because Opus Dei transgresses traditional boundaries separating clerical and lay life, the Church had difficulty finding the right canonical status for the organization. Officially, it is the Catholic Church's only "personal prelature." The movement's head, a bishop, resides in Rome, and members place themselves, for the purpose of spiritual formation, under his authority. Therefore, Opus Dei enjoys a kind of "extraterritoriality" from local dioceses and their bishops that is usually granted only to religious orders of priests and nuns. This unusual status has increased the organization's independence—and its critics' suspicions.

Suspicions about the group's allegedly eccentric character were confirmed for some by the spy scandal surrounding Robert Hanssen, which included a bizarre, voyeuristic, sexual dimension as well. Hanssen and his wife were "supernumerary" members of Opus Dei. Supernumeraries comprise the bulk of Opus Dei's membership (affiliation is also available as an "associate" or "cooperator"). Most supernumeraries are married, and their spiritual practice mirrors that of celibate numeraries. Hanssen actually confessed his spying to an Opus Dei priest. In a good example of why Opus Dei's myopic spirituality is worrisome, the priest told Hanssen to stop spying and to give his blood money to charity, but not to turn himself in. His family—at one level Opus Dei is all about (large) family values—came first.

Opus Dei's reconciliation of Catholic supernaturalism with modern economic and professional accomplishment—Hanssen was a computer whiz—confounds expectations. On the one hand, the group's valorization of worldly achievement and economic individualism has a Protestant feel to it. Historically, material success was a sign of divine election, of God's blessing, within Protestantism. Max Weber, of course, linked the Protestant ethic with the rise of capitalism. Sociologist Joan Estruch (*Saints and Schemers*, 1995) has applied that analysis to Opus Dei, exploring how its discipline of hard work, thrift, and devotion to educational excellence has appealed to elites in Catholic cultures, like Spain's, undergoing modernization.

Many Catholics in Europe and in the United States regard the movement as politically reactionary, extreme in its spiritual and worldly ambition, and devious. The group's manner of "recruiting," especially of college students, has been criticized as overbearing or worse. There is even an organization, the Opus Dei Awareness Network, dedicated to



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exposing the group's methods. But Opus Dei has its admirers, who see it as a defender of traditional moral values, especially of the family, as well as a providential source of evangelical enthusiasm, orthodoxy, and unquestioned loyalty to Rome. Chief among those admirers was John Paul II, who presided over the speedy canonization of the movement's founder. Critics, however, saw Escriva's 2002 canonization as a sure sign of the organization's ill-gotten wealth and malign influence.

These conflicting views form the background to the story John Allen tells. On the whole, Allen thinks Opus Dei has been more sinned against than sinning. He compares the group's stringency to acquiring a taste for Guinness Extra Stout, and wants to give the organization (and Extra Stout) every benefit of the doubt. For example, he rejects objections raised over Escriva's hasty elevation to sainthood by two veteran observers of the Church, Kenneth Woodward, former *Newsweek* religion editor, and Cambridge historian Eamon Duffy. "The canonization of the founder of Opus Dei is the most striking example in modern times of the successful promotion of a cause by a pressure group," Duffy insisted. Woodward called it "a scandal." Escriva's authoritarian temperament and sometimes violent behavior were never fully investigated by the Church, say critics.

Allen argues that those promoting Escriva's cause mastered the bureaucratic procedures and outworked their opponents. "Opus Dei may have played hard and fast, but they played by the rules," he writes. Opus Dei had the financial resources to press Escriva's case and, most important, the strong support of John Paul II. Where critics saw a miscarriage of justice, one that brought the Church's claims to speak the truth into question, Allen sees a clash of worldviews and a failure to understand how the Vatican operates. On the question of Escriva's sanctity, which is after all the heart of the matter, he cops a plea.

Too often, the "objective look" promised in the book's subtitle means leaving things at the he-said, she-said level. Amassing an enormous amount of testimony, if not evidence, Allen examines a long list of Opus Dei's alleged offenses, including its social elitism, secrecy, nefarious influence in the Vatican, conservative secular politics, manipulative methods of indoctrination, gruesome physical mortifications, pursuit of wealth, and sexist treatment of women. In nearly every instance, Allen judges the organization to be as much a force for good as for ill. In short, Opus Dei's bad rep is largely the result of poor communication.

In making his case, Allen wants to remind readers that a good deal of religious belief and practice is only understandable when considered from a variety of perspectives, what he calls a *Rashomon* approach, after the 1950 Kurosawa film in which a disputed event is recalled in wildly different ways by different participants. That judgments about disputed questions "come down to matters of interpretation" and "different frames of reference" are insipid observations, however. That people view reality from "radically different perspectives" is where a "look behind the myths and reality" of a religious group should begin, not end.

Especially unsatisfactory is Allen's treatment of Escriva and the cult of personality surrounding the saint. He acknowledges that Escriva's writings, largely a collection of pious aphorisms, are thought "banal" by many. Indeed, they read like a cross between the gnomic utterances of Yoda and the bullying of Donald Rumsfeld. They also make clear Escriva's extreme views on Church authority. "Obedience, the sure way," begins entry 941 in *The Way*. "Blind obedience to your superior, the way of sanctity. Obedience in your apostolate, the only way; for, in a work of God, the spirit must be to obey or to leave." Submission to religious authority is understood to be a good in itself. The language and images of war suffuse Escriva's writing, as does his contempt for those who are "lukewarm" in their vocation.

As it turns out, Allen's conclusion is a useful, if unintended, example of the *Rashomon* experience itself. After 350 pages of bending over backwards to show how Opus Dei's public image is distorted by "the cultural gap that separates Anglo-Saxon corporate thinking from the rest of the world," Allen makes a number of sensible suggestions for reforming the movement, all of which fall into that gap. He urges the group to be more transparent in dealings with others and in identifying its operations and reporting its finances, to collaborate with other Catholic groups, whose liberal tendencies Opus Dei has long resisted, and to become more open and self-critical.

But if Escriva's writing is any guide, "saints" do not value this sort of compromise. Being a saint is not "a matter of interpretation" or a question of developing a taste for one brand of reality over another. Saints don't believe in choice or taste, but in the will of God. For Opus Dei, the business of making saints is not one option among many—it is the only option. I fear that in explaining why Opus Dei is misunderstood, Allen seems to have misunderstood it. If Opus Dei's vision of the spiritual life is powerful and compelling—even beautiful and exhilarating—to its adherents, it is precisely because it understands itself to be not just one way of looking at reality, but the only way.

Allen's recommendations to Opus Dei are based on the liberal (and also Catholic, I would argue) virtues of tolerance, public accountability, individual autonomy, dialogue, and a willingness to change in response to altered circumstances. Yet Opus Dei is a proudly illiberal institution, one whose spiritual identity demands the rejection of any "lukewarm" acceptance of what is understood to be moral error. As Allen acknowledges, a defining characteristic of Opus Dei members is that they cannot admit the possibility that Church teaching could be wrong. Obedience and loyalty, self-sacrifice, ascetic discipline, moral certainty, absolute devotion to the Church, especially to the papacy: These are the virtues Opus Dei seeks to instill. If I were in charge of Opus Dei, I would take Allen's recommendations with a large grain of salt, for if adopted they will bring into the group the moral and cultural forces for which Opus Dei was so obviously conceived as an antidote.

Paul Baumann is editor of *Commonweal*.

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Outdoor Market

Can the eco-friendly approach that has made Patagonia, Inc. big profits be a model for all other companies? Nope.

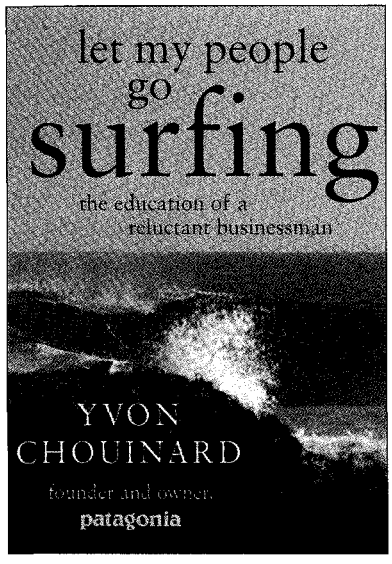
By Brendan I. Koerner

When deciding whether a movie deserved a lukewarm recommendation or a flat-out pan, the late *Chicago Tribune* critic Gene Siskel would ask himself: "Is this film more interesting than a documentary of the same actors having lunch?" After applying the test to 1993's *True Romance*, for example, Siskel slammed the movie, concluding that he would rather watch a video of Dennis Hopper and Christian Slater conversing over meatball sandwiches.

A useful corollary to Siskel's rule as applied to autobiographies of business titans might be: "After reading this book, would I want to have lunch with the author?"

The highest compliment I can thus pay *Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman* is that I'd love to break bread with Yvon Chouinard. A master outdoorsman and eco-activist extraordinaire, Chouinard is also the founder of Patagonia, a company that grosses $230 million per year selling some of the coolest adventure gear on Earth. Patagonia is distinguished not only by the quality of merchandise, but also by its dedication to ethically and environmentally sound corporate policies; it is a Sierra Club member's dream of a multimillion dollar company.

Yet, Chouinard's book has its problems. It shows no signs of having been ghostwritten, which in this case is not a compliment; Chouinard is obviously not familiar with *Mr. T: The Man With the Gold*, another memoir in which the subject failed to hand off the literary duties to a more competent wordsmith.



Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman
By Yvon Chouinard
Penguin Press HC; $26.95

But the bigger problem with the book lies with the lessons he proposes to present from his life and his company's success. Chouinard tends to spout holier-than-thou rhetoric in lieu of concrete ideas. *Let My People Go Surfing* is billed as a manifesto rather than a memoir, and for good reason—Chouinard spends much of the book exhorting readers to learn from Patagonia's philosophy of corporate responsibility. In doing so, he makes Patagonia seem a little like Sweden: earnest and effective, admirable, even enviable, but a bit too smug about its superiority and oblivious to the fact its system can't be applied everywhere.

There is no doubt that Chouinard has led a life worth envying, starting with an adolescence spent scaling the Tetons and camping in Baja California. To make ends meet, he worked for a detective agency that counted Howard Hughes among its clients; the young Chouinard was charged with keeping tabs on Hughes's mistresses and ensuring that the tycoon's yacht was germ-free.

In 1957, using tools salvaged from a junkyard, Chouinard taught himself blacksmithing in order to forge his own mountaineering equipment, such as pitons (the spikes driven into rocks) and carabiners (which connect ropes to pitons). Suffering through a failed marriage and an Army stint in Korea, he eventually turned his metallurgical hobby into a business, selling sturdy gear to fellow climbers.

But he quickly moved on from peddling carabiners to clothing, as anyone who's strolled across a New England university campus can attest. Chouinard started his clothing line with English corduroys and rugby shirts, two garments durable enough to withstand the rigors of rock climbing. He later branched out into quick-drying polyester in the mid-1970s, and then into fleecy Synchilla, which would become the unofficial fabric of cold-weather fraternity houses.

From the beginning, Chouinard fancied himself an enlightened boss. He refers to his management style as MBA—management by absence—and prefers to field test new products in the Andes rather than deal with day-to-day operations. Patagonia also offered its employees such perks as child care and flex time from the very beginning—the book's title refers to the tendency of Patagonia employees to spend their flex time catching waves near the company's Ventura, Calif., headquarters.

Despite his easygoing credo, Chouinard is no slacker. He keeps a watchful eye on Patagonia's dealings with every supplier and contractor, and he exhibits a remarkable fascination with fabric technology; the man is in full command of all trivia related to the melting point of polypropylene. He

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appears to have given far less thought, however, as to why his little blacksmithery grew so rapidly into a booming corporation. Chouinard simply credits the high quality of Patagonia garments, with an occasional hat tip to more mundane business choices—for example, offering jackets in teal and cobalt rather than humdrum brown.

Though recreational climbing has certainly grown in popularity during Patagonia's existence, climbers alone are not sufficient to explain the company's sales. Whether intentionally or not, Chouinard ignores the obvious when he fails to acknowledge his debt to poseurs: Patagonia would still be a niche company were it not for the legions of preppies who responded to the brand's macho imagery, honed in catalogues depicting muscled athletes dangling from outcroppings. It would be fascinating to learn what percentage of Men's Lightweight R4 Vests ($135) are worn exclusively within a 500-yard radius of some variety of asphalt.

Whatever the true source of Patagonia's popularity, the company's explosive growth throughout the 1980s caused Chouinard more angst than joy. He worried that Patagonia would turn into a Nike-like leviathan, utterly divorced from its humble roots. And he despaired over the deterioration of the world's environment, which he witnessed firsthand during his regular forays to the Himalayas, sub-Saharan Africa, and Polynesia. The first problem solved itself: Patagonia suffered a cash-flow crisis in the early 1990s, laid off 20 percent of its workforce, and settled into a more leisurely pace of growth. Protecting the environment, meanwhile, has become Chouinard's personal obsession, and he spends much of the remainder of *Let My People Go Surfing* illustrating how Patagonia has become a decent corporate citizen.

Chouinard has obviously given careful thought to the conundrum of balancing responsibility with profitability, and there's something touching about the way in which he agonizes over the details. At one point, he describes why Patagonia refuses to refer to its cotton garments as organic, even though the cotton is raised on organic farms. He explains that, because other parts of the clothes-making process may involve non-organic dyes, it would be technically inaccurate to refer to the entire finished garment as organic; instead, Patagonia opts for "organically grown." Something tells me that the makers of the organic burritos in my freezer aren't quite so assiduous about labeling.

There is nothing particularly revolutionary about Chouinard's philosophy of sustainable business; he believes in recycling, eliminating the use of pesticides and other toxins, and tithing to worthy environmental causes. Yet the steps that Patagonia has taken to make good on these promises are admirably innovative. Most famously, the company figured out how to recycle plastic soda bottles into fleece jackets; 25 empty two-liter Coca-Cola bottles can be pressed into one new Women's Chute to Thrill Jacket ($399). Chouinard also co-founded 1 Percent for the Planet, an alliance of corporations that pledge 1 percent of their annual sales to environmental groups. Chouinard admits that Patagonia isn't perfect and seems genuinely saddened by the company's shortcomings. At one point, he notes that Patagonia has removed toxic PVCs from all of the company's products, "the sole exception being the foam on the Lotus Design life jackets and some print on t-shirts." Don't go organizing a picket line just yet, though—they're working on the problem.

"Every time we've elected to do the right thing, even when it costs twice as much to do it that way, it's turned out to be more profitable," Chouinard writes. This conclusion runs contrary to conventional wisdom of the Wal-Mart era, which holds that price is all that consumers really care about. It's heartening to read about a company that has stuck to its principles and flourished.

But is the Patagonia model transferable to other companies or other industries? Chouinard is fortunate, of course, that environmentalism dovetails so nicely with his company's *raison d'être*. It's a lot easier to weave eco-consciousness into the corporate mission statement when you're selling Stretch SST Jackets ($325) instead of spark plugs. The more wilderness that remains off limits to development, the more venues there are for the use of Patagonia products. If only the same were true for Big Oil, the world would be a much happier place.

Patagonia is also fortunate to be involved in an industry that is, for lack of a better word, fun. Chouinard writes that he prefers to recruit experienced climbers rather than MBAs, in part because members of the former group are more likely to foster deep convictions about environmentalism. But how can this philosophy be adapted by a company that manufactures, say, Styrofoam? It must be tough to find potential employees who are not only really, really into Styrofoam, but are also willing to spend their spare time lobbying Congress to preserve wetlands.

Chouinard never tackles these issues, just as he dances around the fact that a very finite number of customers can pay $32 for a Capilene Silkweight t-shirt. He does offer up some vague platitudes about convincing other companies that "green business is good business," and he rightfully points out that a scorched planet benefits no one. But he is short on specific prescriptions for how to make corporate responsibility profitable not only for high-end clothing merchants, but for everyone.

There are a few moments of clarity, as when Chouinard elucidates the long-term financial benefits of local production—a viewpoint that makes particular sense as gas prices climb toward $4 per gallon, thereby greatly increasing shipping costs. But such nuggets are too often lost amidst Chouinard's digressions on Zen Buddhism, the philosophy of architecture, and the swallows that live under his roof.

There is no question that Patagonia sounds like a delightful place to work, and that Chouinard deserves plaudits for creating a company where doing good and making money are not mutually exclusive endeavors. But if he expects other businesses to follow his example, he'll need to come up with a more convincing coaxing strategy. Here's an idea: free Synchilla Off-the-Grid Jackets ($130) to every company that eliminates PVCs from its production cycle.

Brendan I. Koerner is a *Wired* contributing editor and a fellow at the New America Foundation.

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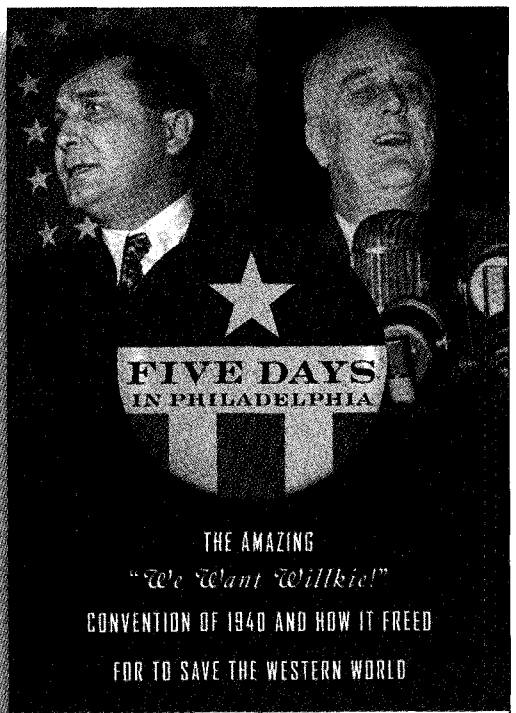

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